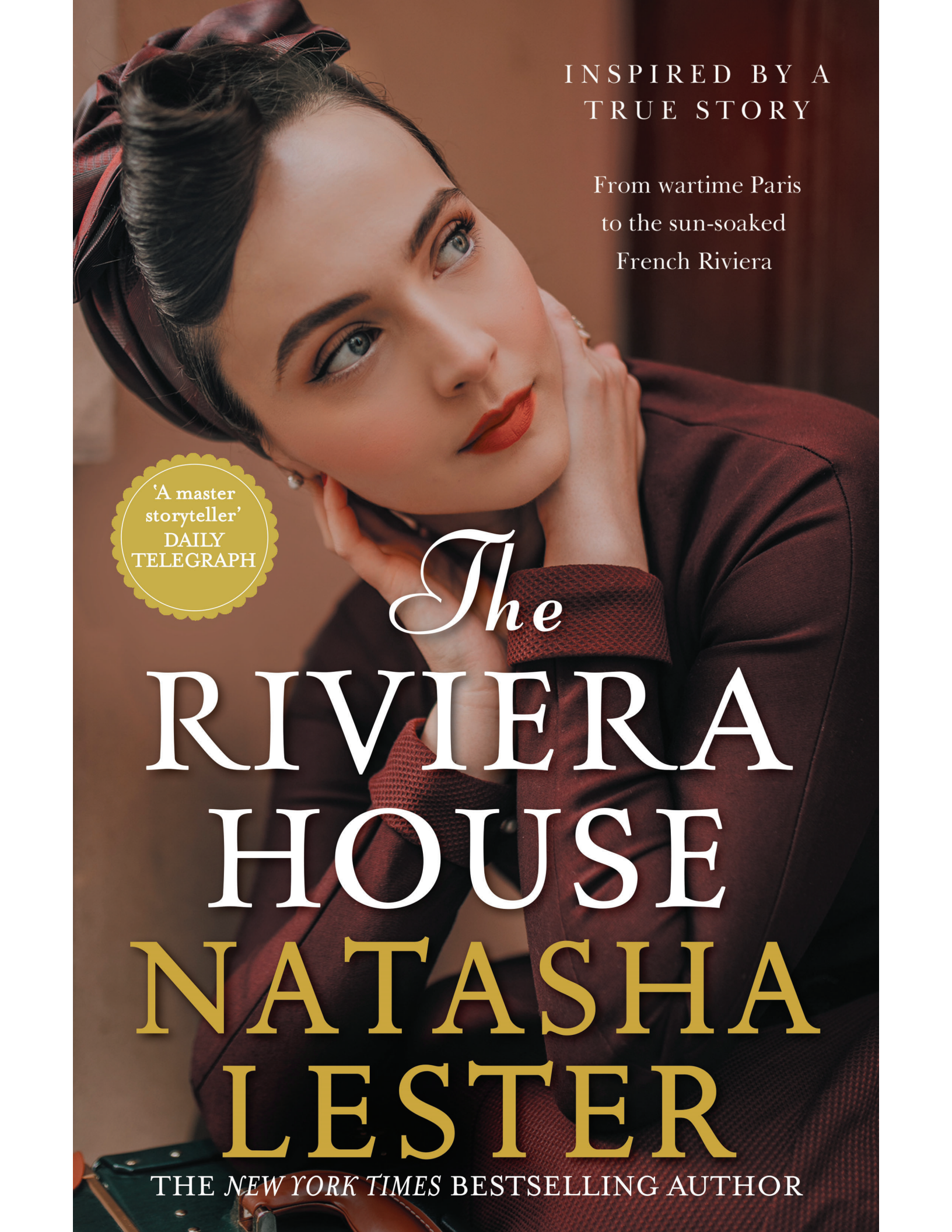




INSPIRED BY A
TRUE STORY

From wartime Paris
to the sun-soaked
French Riviera

'A master
storyteller'
DAILY
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The
RIVIERA
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ALSO BY NATASHA LESTER

A Kiss from Mr Fitzgerald

Her Mother's Secret

The Paris Seamstress

The French Photographer

The Paris Secret

The
RIVIERA
HOUSE
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LESTER

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*To my father, who won't be able to read this book,
and who also may not be here when it is published.
You deserve peace and rest now. I hope it comes soon. All my love.*

*And so we come to the part that might break your heart. Certainly,
I cannot bear such moments, because there are days beyond this
even I cannot see, and they are not always good or easy days. Yet
this is also art. The things that sear a heart.*

— Heather Rose,
The Museum of Modern Love

PART ONE

Paris, 1939–1941

One

I'm going to be late,' Éliane said despairingly to Yolande who, at age five, cared not a bit about Éliane's obligations. In fact, it was obvious from Yolande's clenched fists that a tantrum was bearing down upon all the Duforts and unless Éliane could find something other than a stale knob of bread for breakfast, Yolande would erupt and Éliane would miss her morning lecture at art school.

'We're all hungry,' Angélique, the next oldest after Éliane, snapped at Yolande.

Éliane stared around at the grim and silent faces of her sisters. Twelve-year-old Jacqueline's beseeching eyes were fixed on Éliane, willing her to calm both Yolande's histrionics and Angélique's temper. Ginette, eight, was yawning, having been woken by the fracas of raised voices.

She *was* going to be late. But it wasn't her sisters' fault that their parents threw every available franc, including all of Éliane's pay, into their moribund brasserie and thus there was no food in the house. She whirled around and, despite the almost physical pain she felt at even contemplating it, she gathered all of her sable paintbrushes, threw them into a bag and said in a firm but loving voice to Yolande,

'I promise you'll have a croissant for breakfast tomorrow. But only if you get dressed for school and let Angélique do your hair.'

Yolande jumped up from her teary puddle on the floor, her blonde hair bouncing like her revived spirits as she threw herself at Éliane. 'Merci,' she whispered, head buried in Éliane's skirt.

'I love you,' Éliane said, stroking her sister's hair. Then, while Angélique was occupied with helping Ginette find her shoes, she spoke in Yolande's ear, 'Angélique is scared. It's her first year of looking after you. Help her. Then she'll see that she doesn't have to worry about you so much.'

And to Angélique, as she kissed her goodbye, Éliane explained, 'Yolande just wants to be loved. Hug her. Then she'll behave.'

It had only been six months since Angélique's fifteenth birthday. Her present had been to take over from Éliane the so-called privilege of getting the children ready for school, of bringing them home at the end of the day, collecting leftovers from the brasserie for dinner, feeding everyone and putting them to bed. Yolande and Angélique were each still chafing against the absence of Éliane, who now spent those hours at work.

Luckily Ginette and Jacqueline needed only a hug and a kiss and Éliane was able to leave, clattering around and around the whorling spiral of stairs from their third-floor apartment to the Galerie Véro-Dodat – a formerly resplendent Belle Époque *passage couvert* – below. It was lined with once-grand but now mostly empty mahogany shop façades, separated by chipped marble columns and still-gleeful cherubs – despite the fact that most were missing at least a toe, if not an entire leg. The dank odour of stale coffee emanating from her parents' brasserie settled around the globes of the old gas lamps, causing any patrons foolish enough to venture into the *galerie* to flee with their tastebuds unsullied.

Once out on the street, she continued on to the Musée du Louvre where she would study and work, unshackled from her sisters. The journey made her feel both the lightness of relief and the heaviness

of loss as all the hugs and kisses and tiny affections were now Angélique's. Éliane hoped her sister treasured those affections the way she ought to.

At the Aile de Flore – the wing of the Louvre that stretched along the river – Éliane ran straight up to the École du Louvre. She took her seat in the lecture theatre, looking over the rows of students for her brother Luc, but while Luc's soul was devoted to art, his body worshipped at the cafés of Montparnasse and he was absent again.

Monsieur Bellamy began to speak about Italian Renaissance painters and Éliane concentrated on long-haired and voluptuous women, on cherubs with all of their body parts intact, and on a chiaroscuro of religious chastisements. At lunchtime she left the building, never able to attend afternoon classes as her family needed the money she made from her work. Before she entered the museum proper and sat in her seat at the front desk, ready to direct patrons to the *Venus de Milo* and the *Mona Lisa*, she went to see Monsieur Jaujard, the Director of the Musées Nationaux. He had allowed her to continue at the École despite the fact that she could neither pay for her tuition nor spend a full day there.

'Monsieur,' she asked politely, 'do you know where I can sell my paintbrushes?' She pulled the items out of her bag, refusing to look at the last scraps of her childish dream of being a painter. 'They're good quality, sable, and might suit a new student perhaps.'

Monsieur Jaujard studied her treasures, kindly avoiding looking at her face, which she knew was reddened with both the shame of asking for another favour, and from the loss.

'Leave them with me. I know a young man who might give you a good price.'

'Thank you,' she said, voice low, making herself give over the items by thinking of Yolande's face tomorrow when she had croissants for breakfast instead of stale bread.

Soon before the Louvre closed, Monsieur Jaujard appeared with an envelope, which he handed to Éliane. 'For you.'

She opened it and discovered at least twice what she had hoped to get. Now it was Monsieur's cheeks that flushed as she thanked him profusely, then left the museum, knowing she needed to spend the money that afternoon or it would be poured down the necks of her father and his friends at the brasserie.

Outside, the streets were quiet; the pall of Hitler's unknown ambitions casting a shadow over Paris. Éliane slipped into La Samaritaine and found two cheap but adequate *soutien-gorges* for Jacqueline, who had needed a bra for several months but, even if their mother had noticed her daughter's maturity in the fog of her tiredness from working eighteen hours a day at the brasserie, there had been no money to do anything about it. Once Éliane had paid for the undergarments, there was enough left to buy croissants too.

She was smiling as she walked home, knowing her bags held both goods and happiness for her sisters, until someone carrying two gas masks stepped onto the sidewalk in front of her. She looked away. But on the other side of the street was another Parisian laden with similarly disquieting objects.

Hitler could not really be coming for France. He had taken enough of Europe already. Still, she stopped walking and stared at her shopping bags. A bra would soothe Jacqueline's growing embarrassment over her rapidly curving body; a gas mask might save her life.

'Éliane!'

An arm slung itself around her shoulders and then, beside her on the path was her brother Luc. One year older and as blond as she, he was grinning in a way that always made her smile.

'Do you remember my friend Xavier?' Luc began, lighting a cigarette and speaking around it, his arm still draped over her shoulders so she had to hold her own hand up to shield the flame from the wind. 'He was at school with me for a couple of years before his family took him back to England?'

Éliane vaguely recalled a dark-haired boy, French-born but who'd mostly lived in England, being underfoot in the apartment several

afternoons each week after school, many years before. He'd been a couple of years older than Luc, but Luc had decided that this Xavier was going to be the next Picasso and had coerced Xavier into giving him painting lessons. Never mind that Luc was supposed to be helping Éliane look after the children; he'd spend the time until dinner painting, and would whisk away the evidence before their mother came upstairs to tuck them into bed, at which time Xavier would be gone. He'd been a secret, like Éliane's own wish to be a painter – something that was spoken of only in the absence of parents on the top step outside the apartment at night, coffee in hand.

'I ran into him today,' Luc said. 'In Montparnasse. He was there to see Matisse. Matisse!'

'Matisse?' Éliane repeated, laughing now at her brother's enthusiasm. 'Then he must have changed a lot since I last saw him. He used to wear those awful English short trousers—'

'They don't fit me anymore.' A voice broke in from behind.

Luc laughed as if Éliane had said something hilarious and Éliane turned to see a dark-haired *homme* with oil-paint stains on his fingers. He was wearing a suit rather than short trousers, his shirt sleeves were rolled up, a jacket slung over his shoulder like a grown-up man.

'You're Xavier?' she said disbelievingly.

He nodded. 'And you must be Éliane. Although I don't think I've ever seen you without at least one sister in your arms.'

'Angélique looks after everyone now.' As she spoke, she was, for almost the first time in her life, acutely aware of how simple her dress was. She'd made it from a remnant of fabric thinking it mimicked a Lanvin day dress she'd seen in a catalogue, but now it felt like a child's attempt at playing dress-up.

Xavier, for all the paint on his hand, looked at least five years older than her, even though she knew he was only twenty-three to her twenty.

All at once, every church bell in Paris began to chime and Éliane snapped to attention. 'I'm late,' she said for the second time that day. 'Give that to Jacqueline.' She thrust her parcel at Luc. 'I'll have to go straight to the brasserie, otherwise—'

She stopped herself from saying it but her hand strayed to her cheek nonetheless.

'Go,' Luc said.

But he and Xavier walked almost as fast as she did and it meant they saw what happened: her father roaring, even though it was only five minutes past six, 'Where were you?'

'Buying Jacqueline a bra, since nobody else will,' she shot back. Her father hit her, a stinging blow.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Xavier put a hand on the brasserie's door. She only let herself breathe out when Luc pushed him away and up the stairs to the apartment, where Xavier would see that much of their furniture was gone – sold off to pay Papa's debts – beyond the necessities of beds, a table, a sofa and six chairs.

Her mother, who had come out of the kitchen at the sound of the blow, caught Éliane's eye and offered a sympathetic shrug.

If only Éliane could afford the luxury of a headache.



Éliane folded napkins until there was somebody to wait on. Customers were scarce and, as two tables were occupied by her father's friends – who were there for the heavily discounted wine – Éliane knew it would be a long time – or likely never – before she was permitted to be a full-time student at the École du Louvre.

Close to eight-thirty, she saw Angélique in the *passage* beckoning to her. She slipped out. 'What is it?'

'Yolande can't find her doll. The one she likes to sleep with.'

Éliane closed her eyes and tried to think. There weren't many places to hide anything in their sparse apartment.

‘And my gloves are missing too,’ Angélique added quietly. ‘The ones you gave me for my birthday.’

They both looked towards the kitchen where their father was cooking dinners.

Then Éliane’s eyes locked with her sister’s. ‘Maybe he hasn’t sold them yet,’ she said. ‘Maybe I can find them.’

‘Yolande won’t sleep without her doll.’

Her usually feisty sister spoke resignedly and Éliane drew her into her arms, kissing her forehead, understanding how much effort it was taking for Angélique to think of Yolande’s doll rather than her own precious gloves. ‘Give Yolande something of mine to sleep with,’ Éliane said, knowing that a sleepless Yolande would fray everyone’s tempers. ‘And you can have my gloves.’

Angélique squeezed her fiercely and, for the millionth time in her twenty years, Éliane wished she could gather up all of her sisters and run away. Surely she could do better than a bankrupt father and a worn-out mother? She frowned as she watched Angélique climb the stairs. Perhaps it was time to give up art school altogether and work at the Louvre in the mornings too.

The minutes ambled on. At ten o’clock, the bell tinkled and Éliane, who had been hoping to close up, turned to the door with a pasted-on smile.

Xavier stood there. ‘I was hoping I could get a glass of wine,’ he said, the accent of his mother tongue hardly marred at all by his time in England.

‘Luc’s not here,’ she replied, knowing her brother would be in Montparnasse, drinking wine too, and pretending that by visiting the cafés frequented by the artists of the School of Paris, he was producing artistic works himself. She’d expected Xavier would be with him.

‘I’ve been in Montparnasse for two hours listening to Luc talk about muses with an artists’ model. I was looking for somewhere less noisy.’

‘Well,’ she gestured to the sweep of empty chairs, ‘you’ve found the quietest restaurant in Paris.’

He laughed. ‘It’s probably not the best slogan to get customers in the door, but it’s just what I want.’

Éliane’s smile was real now. She showed him to a table and poured some wine.

Xavier glanced at the kitchen, where her father’s tipsy voice rang with a lewd song. ‘Can you sit down?’

She nodded.

Xavier passed the wine to her. ‘It’s for you.’

‘Thank you,’ she said, sipping and feeling the dragging tiredness in her feet disappear. ‘Are you in Paris for a holiday?’ she asked, suddenly eager to know more about this man who bought her wine and asked her to sit. ‘It seems a strange time to come.’ Beside them lay a newspaper; its headline shouted the disquieting news that the Soviet Union had signed a non-aggression pact with the Nazis. Éliane elbowed it away.

‘It’s because the times are so strange that I’m here.’ Xavier leaned back in his chair and she couldn’t help but wonder why he was visiting her, his friend’s sister, who hadn’t had time to touch up her lipstick all day, who wore only a cotton frock and probably a red cheek from her father’s earlier violence.

‘I can’t remember whether you know that my father owns an art gallery here,’ he continued. ‘He has one in London and New York too.’

Éliane smiled wryly. ‘Back then, I was probably too busy yelling at small children while you were telling Luc about that.’

Xavier smiled again and she found herself unable to look away from his eyes, which were dark brown, of a shade she wasn’t sure existed in a tube of paint, and might be too difficult even to mix. It was like morning sunlight dancing on bronze.

‘I don’t remember much about your family, but I remember that you never yelled,’ he said.

Éliane stood up and pulled another glass down from the shelf. Despite the fact that her plan had been to sweep the floor and go to bed, she wasn't tired now. 'I'll be back in a minute,' she said.

She put her head through the kitchen door and spoke to her mother. 'I'll lock up. There's one last customer. But he doesn't want any food.'

Her father grunted, pulled off his apron and strode out, not waiting for her mother, who kissed Éliane's cheeks before she left. Then Éliane returned to Xavier with a bottle of wine, poured him a glass and heard her sigh of relief echo through the now-empty restaurant.

'Sorry,' she said. 'I'm not used to being here and doing nothing.'

Xavier sipped his wine, studying her as if she were a portrait worthy of contemplation. 'Do you still take care of your sisters? Luc said you're studying at the École with him. And working at the Louvre, as well as working here. But I think I remember that you used to paint. Like Luc.'

Éliane gave a short laugh. 'Not like Luc, no,' was all she said.

Xavier waited. Éliane swallowed wine, twirled the glass around and studied the old rings of spilled Bordeaux on the table.

'I used to paint,' she said carefully. 'But canvases are expensive. And you need time to practise. I only take art history classes now. In the mornings. Just until my shift starts at the Louvre.'

'Do you still have any of your work?' Xavier tilted his head down, trying to lift her eyes from the table and back to his face.

She let them drift upwards. 'I had to paint my canvases over in white and sell them,' she said simply, finding herself studying him now.

The dark hair and the dark eyes and the blue shirt and the well-built physique all made him handsome but the thing that made him almost impossibly attractive was his manner. If his father owned art galleries around the world and Xavier met with artists like Matisse, then he had money and power and certainly his bearing and clothing suggested the confidence and self-assurance of someone who knew

their place in the world. But rather than telling her stories about celebrated artists, he was asking her about her own art.

It was so heady – his kindness, the warmth and genuine interest glimmering in his eyes – that she pushed her wineglass away, not needing any further intoxication. ‘You started to tell me about your father’s gallery,’ she prompted, wanting to know more about him too.

‘I’ve just finished a law degree,’ Xavier replied. ‘It was my compromise with my father: I’d go to Oxford, and he’d let me have what he calls my final fling with oil and canvas. A year in France to learn the gallery business from him, and to paint in my spare time’ – he grinned ruefully at the palette of blues on his right hand – ‘and then I’ll stay in Paris to take over the gallery’s European interests, and my father will take care of America and England. With Hitler so unpredictable, we need to be here to make sure everything is secure in case . . .’ He paused.

‘Do you think there’ll be war?’ she asked sombrely.

‘I don’t know.’

Éliane leaned forward, into the conversation. It was a topic her parents seemed wholly uninterested in, that Luc laughed off, and that she didn’t want to frighten her sisters with.

‘I hope Hitler thinks he’s done enough,’ Xavier said. ‘He has Austria, he has Czechoslovakia; he now has an alliance with Russia. And he’s either expelled every artist from Germany and his newly claimed lands who’s Jewish, or who doesn’t paint exactly what he wants, or he’s made sure they’ll never work again. He’s not just seizing nations; he’s destroying their art and culture too.’

‘I hadn’t thought about that,’ Éliane said slowly. ‘How something like war might affect art. Which is silly, because all I have to do is look at history to see it isn’t only people who suffer when countries fight.’

‘Everything suffers when power and money are put in front of avaricious men. And I’m starting to think there are more avaricious men than there are decent ones.’ Xavier sipped his wine and shook

his head. 'Sorry. I didn't mean to come here and talk about melancholy things. I came because . . .'

He looked at her with those eyes, as startling as the chiaroscuro of a Rembrandt painting, then blinked, and she somehow felt as if he had scratched her heart with his eyelashes. 'I wanted to make you smile,' he said, not looking away, unabashed by the regard for her that his words implied. 'Like you smiled at your brother this afternoon on the street. You have a beautiful smile.'

She couldn't help it. Not just her mouth, but her entire face was suddenly recast into a beam of happiness, which Xavier returned. She didn't say, even though she wanted to, *Your smile is beautiful too.*