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THE
PARIS
BOOKSELLER

'I WAS
COMPLETELY
ENTHRALLED'
NATASHA
LESTER



KERRI MAHER

CHAPTER I



It was hard not to feel that Paris was *the* place.

Sylvia had been trying to get back for fifteen years, ever since the Beach family had lived there when her father, Sylvester, was the pastor of the American Church in the Latin Quarter and she was a romantic teenager who couldn't get enough of Balzac or cassoulet. What she remembered most about that time, what she'd carried in her heart when her family had to return to the United States, was the sense that the French capital was brighter than any other city she'd been in or could ever be in. It was more than the flickering gas lamps that illuminated the city after dark, or that ineluctable, glowing white stone from which so much of the city was built—it was the brilliance of the life burbling in every fountain, every student meeting, every puppet show in the Jardin du Luxembourg and opera in the Théâtre de l'Odéon. It was the way her mother sparkled with life, read books, and hosted professors, politicians, and actors, serving them rich, glistening dishes by candlelight at dinners where there was spirited debate about books and world events. Eleanor Beach told her three daughters—Cyprian, Sylvia, and Holly—that they

were living in the most rare and wonderful of places, and it would change the course of their lives forever.

Nothing had compared, not making posters and answering phones and knocking on doors with Cyprian and Holly and Mother for the National Woman's Party in New York; not adventuring in Europe solo and reveling in the spires and cobblestones of many other cities; not her first longed-for kiss with her classmate Gemma Bradford; not winning the praise of her favorite teachers.

But here she was now, actually *living* in the city that had captured her soul.

From the rooms she shared with Cyprian in the staggeringly beautiful if also crumbling Palais Royale, Sylvia made her way down to the Pont Neuf and crossed to the other side of the Seine, breathing in the wind from the river that whipped her short locks of hair across her face and threatened to extinguish her cigarette. She stopped in the middle of the bridge to look east and admire Notre-Dame Cathedral, with its symmetrical Gothic towers flanking the rose window and the precariously dainty buttresses whose strength still dumbfounded her—they'd been holding up those gargantuan walls for centuries.

Soon she was winding her way through the narrower streets of the Latin Quarter, which were still familiar from her adolescent wanderings. Though she got a tiny bit lost, it was happily so, because it gave her an opportunity to admire the Église de Saint-Germain-des-Prés and ask instructions of a pretty French student sipping café crème at a sidewalk table at Les Deux Magots. At last she stopped at 7 rue de l'Odéon, the location of A. Monnier, bookseller.

The facade of Madame—*ou, peut-être, mademoiselle?*—Monnier's little shop was painted a pleasing shade of gray with a pale script bearing the proprietress's name above the large picture windows. When Sylvia pushed open the door, a single bell jingled cheerfully. A scattering of people stood here and there among the floor-to-

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ceiling shelves stocked heartily with books; they were reading and browsing spines, but no one was talking and so it was as silent as an empty church. Feeling suddenly shy about asking her question, Sylvia looked around and postponed her request.

She was glad she did, for she discovered some beautiful editions of her favorite French novels, and read nearly an entire short story in the latest issue of *Vers et Prose*, and as she did the shop stirred to life around her. Customers made register-clanging purchases and chatter couples entered, filling the place with sound.

Plucking the book she'd come to buy off the shelf, along with the journal she'd been absorbed in, Sylvia went to the desk with the big brass cash register, where a striking woman of about her own age stood smiling with her slim lips and Mediterranean-blue eyes, the contrast of her dove-white skin and raven hair making her impossible not to look at. In her mind, Sylvia heard Cyprian criticize the woman's outfit as old fashioned, with its floor-length skirt and the blouse buttoned all the way up, both overly modest barriers to the voluptuous figure beneath, but Sylvia liked everything about the look of this woman. She seemed like the kind of person one could talk to. There was something more, too, though; Sylvia felt such a strong urge to stroke the woman's smooth cheek.

"Did you find . . . your heart's desire?" the woman asked in heavily accented English.

My heart's desire? Sylvia smiled at the typically French passion in the woman's plainly spoken words, then replied in French, "Yes, I did, though I'm disappointed you knew I wasn't French." Languages were something of a gift to her; she spoke three fluently. She was gratified to see that as soon as she spoke, the woman appeared impressed by her accent.

"Where are you from?" she asked, in French this time, using the formal *vous*.

“The United States. Most recently Princeton, New Jersey, near New York City. My name is Sylvia, by the way. Sylvia Beach.”

The woman clapped her hands together and exclaimed, “Les États-Unis! The home of Benjamin Franklin! But he is my favorite! I am Adrienne Monnier.”

Sylvia laughed, as it somehow made perfect sense that this pretty girl in the outdated clothes should so admire her own favorite founding father. Mademoiselle indeed; not madame in the slightest. “Pleased to meet you, Mademoiselle Monnier. Your shop is very special. And I like Ben Franklin, too,” she admitted. “But have you read any Hawthorne? Thoreau? What about *Moby Dick*? That’s one of my favorites.”

And they were off. Sylvia learned all about what American authors had and had not been translated into French, and also how difficult it was to come by English-language books even in cosmopolitan Paris. “And anyway,” Adrienne admitted with a demure flicker of her lashes to the floor, “my English is not good enough to read the great literature in its mother tongue.”

“Perhaps not yet,” Sylvia assured her, feeling her heart grow and glow in her chest. Something was passing between them, and it was more than just books, she was sure of it. Her hands felt clammy with it.

“There you are, Adrienne,” sang a lilting and lovely voice from behind Sylvia.

She turned and saw a stunning waif of a woman, with a thick and wavy mane of reddish-blond hair piled atop her head, who wore a similar ensemble to Adrienne’s, though it fit her slight frame entirely differently. Her fingers were long and slim and moved airily, as if they were not entirely under the control of the woman who possessed them. But when they rested on Adrienne’s shorter, thicker hand, Sylvia could see the intent there and knew immediately the two women were lovers.

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And there she'd been thinking that she and Adrienne were flirting. Already, they'd slipped into using the familiar *tu* instead of *vous*.

The warmth and admiration in Adrienne's smile at this woman, who now stood shoulder to shoulder with her, opened a painful fissure in Sylvia's heart. These two women had something here, together and in the store. Something she'd been looking for a long time but hadn't known she wanted—*needed*—until she saw it. Was this something she could make happen, for herself? What was *this* anyway? Sylvia felt suddenly disoriented, knocked off balance by her surroundings: the store, the women, the books, the baritone hum of the other patrons.

"Suzanne," said Adrienne, "Please meet our new friend Sylvia Beach, of the United States. Sylvia, this is Suzanne Bonnierre, my business partner."

In an overly enthusiastic gesture, Sylvia thrust out her hand, which Suzanne appeared amused to shake. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mademoiselle Beach."

"Sylvia, please," she said. "What an amazing store you have here. It's so cozy and inviting, and you stock only the best." Though she did wonder why Suzanne's was not part of the name of the store. Well, Sylvia supposed, Monnier and Bonnierre, however charming they looked and sounded together, might have been a bit too obvious, liberal as Paris was about such things. Just the other night, Cyprian had stuffed Sylvia into a pantsuit and donned a sequined dress herself, then enveloped them both in full-length cloaks for the metro ride to a new bar on the rue Edgar-Quinet where the clientele was entirely women, half of whom wore monocles and spats. The establishment looked like any other local watering hole from the outside, with a small awning simply labeled BAR, but once they were inside, the loud, jazzy openness of the place had made Sylvia uncomfortable. She'd told herself to relax and enjoy the fact that she was living

somewhere such an establishment could prosper, somewhere she could be entirely honest about her attractions and a woman in a tweed suit and cap could sing Billy Murray tunes; it was even protected by the law because same-sex relations had been decriminalized in the French Revolution. But she didn't enjoy feeling like another piece of fruit in a market. The reader in her preferred the quiet and subtlety of A. Monnier.

"Why thank you," Suzanne replied. "I have never been to your country, but I have heard and read many wonderful things about it. It has been quite an inspiration to France, of course."

"There might be many excellent things about my country, but I'm glad to be here instead," Sylvia replied, her mind going straight to the rise in censorship under the Comstock and Espionage Acts, the long and precarious slog to women's suffrage, and the outrageous idea of an alcohol prohibition that was spreading like wildfire. It seemed like ideas that had once seemed fringe, too strange to contemplate as serious, had taken root in America while good, strong ideas that would help the country progress into the new century were languishing away.

"We are also glad you're here," Adrienne said, beaming.

"You must come to the reading tonight!" Suzanne exclaimed. "Our dear friends Valery Larbaud and Léon-Paul Fargue will be there. And Jules Romains. You know these writers?"

"Of course I do! It would be an honor to meet them." The prospect also set Sylvia's stomach churning. *Jules Romains? Vraiment?* What could she possibly have to say to him?

"Come back at eight. We pay no attention to the air raids anymore."

Well. There was simply no concentrating on her Spain essay after that. Sitting at her little desk in the Palais, Sylvia kept catching the scent of dust and lavender that reminded her of A. Monnier—the

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shop and the woman, both—and every time she buried her nose in her sleeves to find the source of it, she found it was always elusive.

She couldn't help thinking that this distraction was just one more sign she was not destined to be a writer, despite the fact that after all the reading she'd done in her life, everyone around her, from her parents and sisters to her oldest friend, Carlotta Welles, just assumed she would be one.

"There's a Walt Whitman in you," her father told her every time she brought home another high mark on a school essay. "I just know it."

But essays were not poems, or novels. When she tried her hand at verse or a story, it came out all wrong. She adored Whitman. To try to be anything remotely like him—or Kate Chopin or any of the Brontë sisters, for that matter—almost seemed an insult. It didn't help that as she grew older, she began to prefer the writers she saw successfully continuing Whitman's legacy, singing so startlingly of themselves and the world that she would sometimes complete one of their works and lie awake half the night wondering, *How do they do it? How do they reach inside me, put their fist around my very soul, and rattle it in its cage?* It had been like that with Chopin's *The Awakening* especially, and also with James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Oh god, she felt a roiling stew of lust and admiration and jealousy thinking of both those novels. The exquisite honesty with which they wrote about bodies and their cravings, and the guilt and consequences of those cravings, using words strung into unsettling sentences that embodied the very nature of the character's inner turmoil, made Sylvia sweat in her sheets.

Could she ever write so bravely, knowing her minister father, whom she loved dearly, would read every word? It was one thing for him to quietly accept her spinsterhood, and perhaps even her discreet sapphism—for he'd never encouraged her to marry and he'd never

questioned the friendships she'd had with women, which after all had run the gamut between entirely platonic and, rarely, heart-wrenchingly intimate—but it would be quite another thing for her to write about her desires with the kind of honesty she admired in the new writing she was starting to see in the more progressive journals.

Could she write about her own deepest longings with abandon, without abandoning herself? Could she help fill the pages of her favorite journal, *The Little Review*, which its editor Margaret Anderson had boldly left entirely blank in 1916, publishing twenty-odd white pages with only an editorial saying that she was no longer willing to publish *good enough* writing; everything she published had to be true art. Art that would remake the world. And Sylvia believed with all her heart that this *was* the purpose of art—to be new, to make change, to alter minds.

She recalled her mother's reply to her father's suggestion about Whitman: "Or maybe she'll be the next Elizabeth Cady Stanton." Why did her parents have to pick such big shoes for her to fill? Was it their fault she was secretly jealous of Cyprian's success in acting?

In some ways, Cyprian was the reason they were in Paris at all, so Sylvia supposed she ought to be grateful. Her sister had a recurring part in a popular weekly film called *Judex*, which was so well known that the two of them were regularly stopped in the street and asked for autographs; occasionally, someone would even ask Sylvia for her signature, assuming she was some sort of up-and-comer hanging around with the glittering, gorgeous star. Sylvia would sigh and reflect that it had always been this way between her and her younger sister. Even at thirty years old, Sylvia was still riled that Cyprian could rely on her arresting *looks* to get attention, while she toiled in libraries and at desks, hoping her words and ideas might be discovered someday.

"It's always adolescent boys and little girls, though," Cyprian

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would complain after signing another napkin or cardboard coaster. “Where are the *ducs* and other admirers of means?”

“You know they exist, sister darling. They’re the ones sending you *Veuve* and *Pernod* at the Ritz.” *And anyway, you only want the male attention for the status of it.* Cyprian was more willing to attach herself to a man than Sylvia, who’d entirely sworn off the idea of marriage, even a marriage of convenience that could provide her with some camouflage when she needed it. Joining her identity with that of a man, even one who preferred sharing his bed with another man, was simply not appealing. For joining, she’d noticed, almost always meant subsuming. And even though Sylvia was one of very few people on earth who knew her sister preferred the affections of women, Cyprian liked to act parts that flattered her, and helped her afford Chanel dresses and Italian shoes, indulging a taste for finer things she’d inherited from their mother.

“If I could just get a part *onstage*, they could send flowers to my room” was her familiar lament.

When at last it was time for her to return to the rue de l’Odéon, Sylvia took the metro and then paced the cobblestone courtyard in front of the Odéon Theater up the street for half an hour, chain-smoking and rehearsing possible topics of conversation to have with *famous writers*, before she told herself she was being silly and marched into Adrienne’s shop.

In the summer twilight, the lamps were soft and the conversation bright. Adrienne and Suzanne swanned about the room, pouring drinks, touching backs, inciting laughter. Adrienne especially—the other guests competed for a chance to wave her over. A veritable Hestia of books, she was otherwise engaged in deep and serious conversation with a small group when Suzanne introduced Sylvia to Valéry Larbaud and Jules Romains. Both men kissed her on each cheek as if they’d known each other for years. “Monnier has been

telling us all about you,” Romaines informed her. “That you are a reader, and that you enjoy the American transcendentalists. I wonder if you also like Baudelaire? Of the same period here in France?”

“Oh, of course. *Fleurs du mal* was important on both sides of the Atlantic,” she replied, and basked in the warmth of his approval. They went on to chat for some time about nineteenth-century literature, a conversation that flowed seamlessly into others about recent novels and poetry, the end of the war, and the prospects for literature in France.

Well. Maybe all that reading is finally paying off.

The tickle of a hand lightly touching her elbow made Sylvia jump and slosh a little wine out of her glass. *Adrienne*. Sylvia turned from Larbaud and Romaines to her hostess, who smiled and kissed her on both cheeks, a greeting Sylvia reciprocated, though with overly firm lips.

“Are you having a good time, my friend?” Then, without waiting for Sylvia to answer, *Adrienne* fixed her eyes on the two men and said, “I trust you’ve been making our new American friend feel welcome?”

“Very welcome,” Sylvia rushed to assure everyone.

“And as usual, *Monnier*,” said Larbaud, “you have added another treasure to this bounty.”

It seemed impossible they were talking about her. Or that she’d been so nervous just an hour before. Sylvia felt at home there, as if she’d been stopping by this shop all her life. And yet, it was also thrilling like a new adventure, a fall headlong into the unknown.

“Do not blush, dear Sylvia!” *Adrienne* laughed. “I knew you were a treasure the moment I laid eyes on you.”

“Well, my sister is an actress, so I’m afraid I’ve rather gotten used to her being the treasure.”

“An actress?” Romaines cocked an eyebrow. “Anything we might have seen?”

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“Judex. It’s a weekly.”

The two men laughed uproariously, the wine they’d consumed making the apples of their cheeks red.

“Pay them no mind,” said Adrienne, playfully patting Romain’s arm as he got hold of himself. “They are the worst snobs. I love the cinema myself, even some of the regular dramas. I have not seen *Judex*. Perhaps we should go.”

There it was again. The *frisson*. Why did the French have the best words for attraction?

“We should. Cyprian would be thrilled.”

“Suzanne will love it, too.”

Suzanne. How could I have forgotten?

And yet, there she was again, as if summoned by their conversation, with a loose, lingering kiss on Adrienne’s cheek and a hearty, familiar greeting for the men—reminders that Sylvia was the newcomer, the outsider, that no matter how warmly she was received, none of this was truly *hers*.