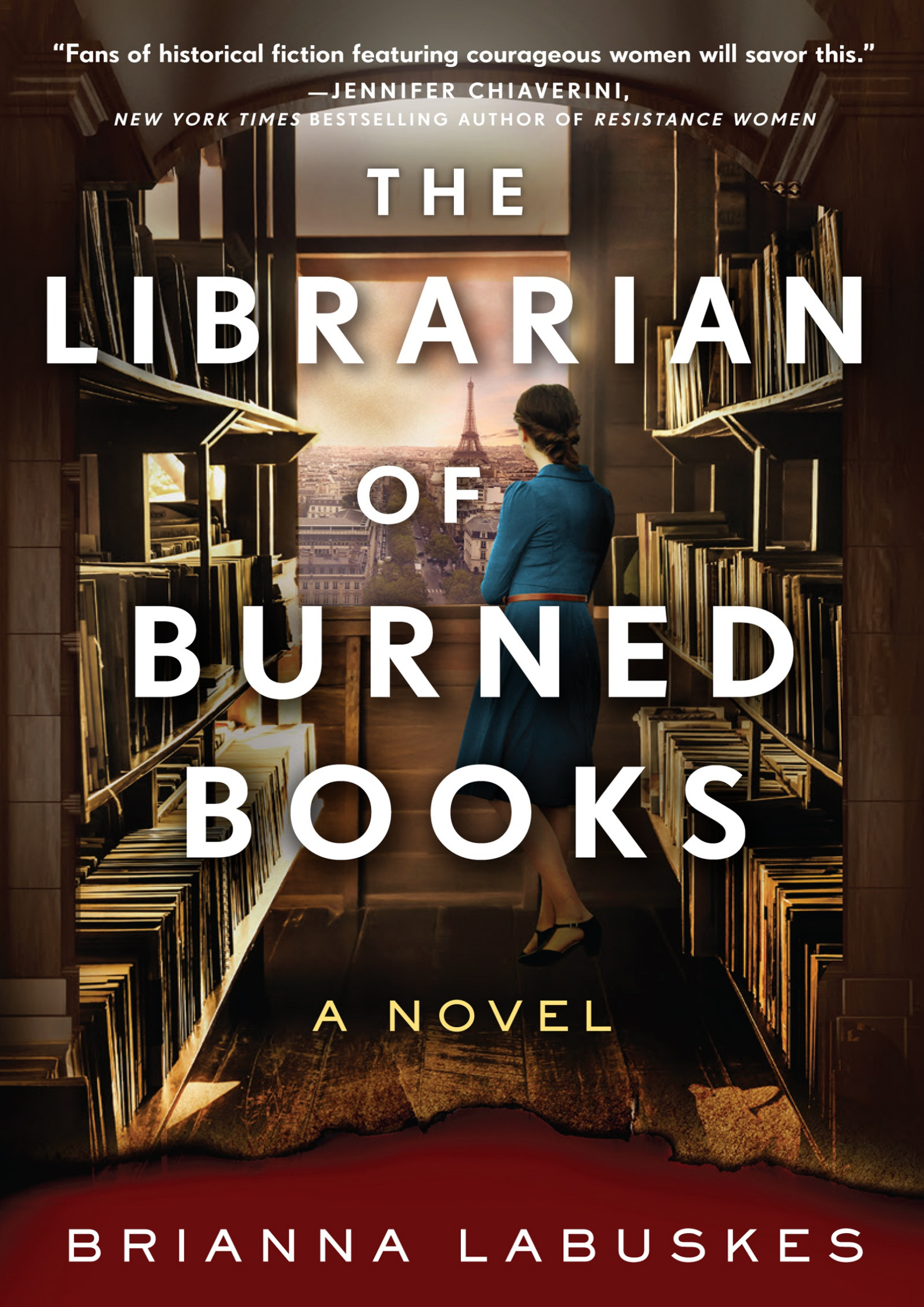


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## *Dedication*

*To librarians, the guardians of books*

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## Prologue

New York City  
November 1943

The telegram regretfully informing Vivian Childs that her husband had died in battle arrived before his last letter.

When Viv saw the familiar scrawl on an envelope two weeks after that baby-faced sergeant had knocked on the door, her knees gave out. She hit the marble floor of the entryway with a sharp crack that she distantly knew should hurt but didn't.

Edward.

For one desperate second, Viv thought that terrible telegram must have been a mistake.

But no, that couldn't be. This was a ghost, the words of a dead man who didn't yet realize his fate.

Viv's heart beat painfully against her wrists, her throat, and time passed, the ticking of the grandfather clock matching the throbbing at her temples. The comforting numbness that had protected her for the past two weeks had lifted and the pain she'd been holding at bay rushed in to every hollow space in her body.

It was almost a relief when the knob of her wrist connected with the edge of the table as she groped for the letter above her. That kind of pain she understood.

She stared at her name on the envelope, touching it and then his gently before slipping her nail underneath one corner.

My Viv,

*I cannot tell you how grateful I am for your letters. Please keep them—and updates about your amusing feud with Mrs. Croft and her smug poodle—coming. All the men are as invested in the outcome of the blue-dye incident as I am.*

*You never think of war as dull, and yet there is nothing but monotony and sand and then moments of terror that leave you shaking for the long hours until all that wears off and what's left is monotony once more. Your stories keep us entertained more than you can know.*

*On that front, we may have more relief coming, thank goodness. The army has launched an ingenious initiative wherein they ship us poor, bored boys small, portable books to keep us entertained and distracted from all the bombs that are landing inches from our heads.*

*Forgive my dryness. But truly, the books have been a godsend to us. I managed to nab a*

*copy of Oliver Twist, and it makes me think of Hale. My brother is too proud to have ever accepted what he would have thought of as charity from me, but I do wish I had figured out a way to help him more when we were children. Thinking of him struggling when I had so much . . . well, the guilt makes it harder to sleep, doesn't it? War is good at that—making you remember everything you wish you'd done differently.*

*I know this letter pales in comparison to your lively ones, but please don't punish me for my lack of stories by withholding your own. Give Mother my love.*

*Yours,  
Edward*

Viv ignored Edward's mention of his brother Hale as much as she ever could. A flash of hot summer nights, sticky cotton-candy lips, a teasing smile, and calloused hands came and went, a lightning strike in the dark night of her grief.

Why think about something she could never have?

Instead, she reread the letter, and for the first time in two weeks let herself picture Edward. Every time she had tried before, she had only been able to see a bruised and broken body, ripped flesh and blood, charred earth and flames. Now, she imagined him in front of a fire, but a gentle one, at night, surrounded by his brothers-in-arms. He cradled a book in his hands, calling out favorite passages to the others, pausing to listen as they did the same.

She clung to that image, basking in its comforting warmth.

After the fourth time through, Viv lifted a hand to her face and felt the corners of the first smile she'd allowed herself since Edward had died.



## Chapter 1

*New York City  
May 1944*

Viv pressed her spine against the brick wall of the alley as she split her attention between the back door of the ritziest steakhouse in Manhattan and the curious rat that was getting bolder by the second.

In Viv's mind, this escapade had played out with less garbage and more intrigue and she was starting to wonder if her plan was fundamentally flawed. As she pondered the possibility of retreat, the dishwasher she'd been waiting to bribe finally appeared. Her head went a little light in equal parts excitement and terror as she slipped the boy the bill she'd folded up just so.

The stench of days-old cabbage receded once she stepped into the restaurant's kitchen. Her confidence returning, Viv donned the femme fatale persona she'd been channeling all morning in preparation for this wild scheme. She'd even deliberately dressed the part, having paired her black skirt with matching garters and precious stockings with seams that hugged the backs of her calves. She'd pinned her hair into perfect victory rolls she usually didn't have the time to bother with, and she'd carefully slicked on a cherry lip that should have clashed with the red tones in her blond hair but never seemed to.

She wound her way past stoves that belched smoke and men who belched curses, the remnants of both curling around her so that she might as well have been walking through the docks on a foggy morning after having just killed a lover. Her hips swayed at the thought, her shoulders straightening.

It mattered, this feeling. It bolstered her resolve, helped compensate for her trembling hands.

Because Viv would have only one shot at this, and she could not mess it up.

Senator Robert Taft was headed back to Washington, DC, in the morning, and he didn't have a strong track record of answering her letters. This confrontation had to happen in person and it had to be today.

When she stepped out into the steakhouse's dining room, Viv spotted Taft easily. Before she'd met him months earlier, she'd pictured him as a small man, with a frame that curled in on itself. Pictured mean eyes and pinched features. A weak jaw. The personification of his petty personality.

In reality, he towered over his lunch companions, the candlelight glinting off his bald head. He took up space in that way powerful men seemed naturally able to, his arm spread along the back of the circular booth.

Viv had been right about the jaw, though.

And the personality.

A guard stopped Viv before she got to the group, melting out of the curtains beside the booth, a dangerous shadow she should have anticipated. She had, really. She'd just thought he would have been stationed by the entrance and directed to keep her out.

After all, Viv had been nothing but a thorn in Taft's side for the past six months. He wanted to avoid this conversation as much as she wanted it to happen. Hence the kitchen and the dishwasher and the bribe.

"Senator, if I could have a moment of your time," she called out, going for broke.

The chatter at the table died as everyone tensed. It was a strange moment in history to be a politician, when you were sending the nation's boys to their death while enjoying steak and whiskey lunches on the taxpayers' tab.

Taft's fingers drummed an uneven beat on the rich leather beneath his hand, likely trying to figure out how big of a scene she would make. He wasn't the only diner in the restaurant, after all, and he was nothing if not aware of his image.

Viv even noticed out of the corner of her eye a *New York Post* reporter whom she'd worked with before. As the publicity director for the Council on Books in Wartime, Viv had become friendly with a good number of journalists in the city. The man raised his glass and his brows in a salute, looking far too amused not to already be plotting to include an item about this encounter in the anonymous gossip pages.

The gesture must have caught Taft's attention because his lips flattened into a tight line as he stared at the reporter. Then Taft waved for Viv to take a seat, the other men shuffling out so that Viv was left sliding in far closer to him than she would have liked.

"Mrs. Childs," Taft said on an exhale as if she were a naughty child, called in front of the school principal. "What can I help you with?"

Viv nearly laughed at that. As if he didn't know why she was here.

Without answering, Viv reached into her purse and pulled out the slim books that were at the heart of her crusade against this man. She tossed one on the table in front of him.

“*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*,” Viv said, keeping her eyes locked to his. She wondered if he had ever even seen an Armed Services Edition. She sent him copies of the paperbacks in the mail, but his secretary—the same one who’d clued her in to this lunch—had let her know that any messages from Viv or the council got immediately repurposed as scrap paper. There was a ration on, or else they probably would have ended up in the fire. She threw down the second one. “*Grapes of Wrath*.”

“Mrs. Childs, I don’t know what you think this stunt is accomplishing, but let me assure you—”

She was on a roll, though. “*Candide. Yankee from Olympus. The Call of the Wild*.”

With each title, she slammed one of the green books down on the table between them.

“All of those books will be banned from our Armed Services Editions program under your new censorship policy,” Viv said, sitting back and folding her arms to try to contain the bright, sharp anger coursing through her. “Shall I keep going? There are plenty.”

“It’s not a censorship policy, Mrs. Childs,” Taft said in that supremely rational tone that had her clenching her teeth. “All I’m requiring is that your little council doesn’t use taxpayer money to send to our troops books that are lightly veiled political propaganda.” He slipped a toothpick between thin lips and rolled it from corner to corner. “There are hundreds of well-written, enjoyable books out there that don’t touch on politics. Please feel free to include any number of them in your ASE program.”

“The language is too broad.” Viv prayed he didn’t notice the slight tremor in her voice. Part of her realized she’d let this all become too personal, as if the ASEs and Edward’s final letter were entwined for her now. But she refused to let Taft dismiss her as a hysterical woman, as just another grieving war widow in a country full of them. “If you truly drafted the legislation in good faith, the wording should be changed. Right now, all the ban is doing is crippling our ASE initiative.”

They both knew acting in good faith had never been important to him. His main goal had always been to hurt the council without looking like he was hurting the council.

But she had to try.

“This issue has been debated by the United States Congress and has

been decided. It's law now, girlie," he said, and she heard *you lost* in the spaces between his words. "You think you know better than the Senate?"

Viv wanted to point out that he'd politically threatened any lawmaker who had tried to stand up to him on the issue. That argument wouldn't get her anywhere—he was clearly proud of his underhanded tactics.

"The language is too broad," she repeated, trying to remember the script she'd practiced so many times last night, terrified her tongue would tie in this moment. She waved to the books she'd brought. "Look me in the eye and tell me any of these actually constitute propaganda." When he didn't say anything, she pushed. "Under your policy, the army will have to ban its own instruction manual because it has a picture of President Roosevelt in it. How is that helping anyone?"

"The language has to be broad or people will find loopholes," Taft countered. "Some innocuous books might get caught up in the wider net, but that's the price we have to pay. If you knew anything about legislation or lawmaking you would know that. But you don't. Now, if you'll excuse me."

"It's not just these examples," Viv said, desperate. "It's most of our list."

"Well, then you see why my amendment was needed," Taft said, smiling so broadly that his eyes crinkled. She imagined him at a campaign stop and wondered if people actually bought this image. "Clearly your council required more guidance on which novels are appropriate for our soldiers to read."

Viv blinked at him. "The soldiers who are dying for us. They need to be told what to read?"

Seeming to sense he'd misstepped, Taft tried to buy himself time by picking up his napkin and dabbing at his chin. "Well, regardless, I'm protecting taxpayers who don't want to have their money spent on propaganda approved by a dictator looking to secure his fourth term."

That's where all of this had started, after all. Taft had a deep and abiding hatred of President Roosevelt, and it wasn't exactly secret. But Roosevelt was popular enough that Taft had to be crafty when he attacked the man. And Roosevelt was a vocal supporter of both the Council on Books in Wartime and its wildly successful initiative that every month shipped millions of paperback novels to the boys serving overseas. The ASE program had become so popular that Taft knew Roosevelt would use it as a campaign talking point come the fall. With his censorship policy essentially banning ninety percent of the books the council wanted to send to soldiers, Taft was handcuffing the initiative to the point of irrelevancy.

“Yes, I can tell you care about budgets,” Viv said, her words dripping with ice as she glanced around at the remains of a meal that could have funded the council for a month.

Taft lashed out, his fingertips digging into the bones of her wrist. There would be bruises there tomorrow.

“I’ve been patient with your little tantrum here, young lady,” Taft said, pressing her back into the booth with his bulk. “But I’ll remind you, you are talking to a senator of the United States of America.”

Viv refused to back down now. “Can you deny it? That this is nothing more than an attempt to destroy the council and hurt Roosevelt in the process?”

“I don’t have to deny anything to you,” Taft said, viciously spitting out the word *you*. She was less than a fly to be swatted away, she was nothing.

And maybe Viv—a woman who until six months ago had no more experience with life than throwing charity luncheons to help sell war bonds to her rich friends—was nothing in the grand scheme of things, in this war, in politics.

But in that moment, with Taft looming over her, believing without any doubt that he could intimidate her just like he intimidated everyone around him with bluster and violence, she decided this was her hill to die on.

It might be a small hill, but it was hers.

“The boys carry these books into battle,” she said as softly as possible so that it would land that much harder. She didn’t try to break away from his grasp. Maybe he would feel the steady thrum of her pulse, the surety of her conviction. “A man sent me a copy of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* last week that still had blood on it. He meant it as a thank-you. His buddy had a good laugh the night before he died because of that book.”

She let that sit for a minute before continuing, “A book he wouldn’t have had if your censorship policy had been in place just a few months earlier.”

If she hadn’t been watching closely, she wouldn’t have noticed Taft’s throat bob, a hard swallow, and for one aching painful moment she thought she might have gotten through to him. Then he shifted back, reached into his coat pocket, and pulled out a few bills.

He tossed them on top of the ASEs she’d brought to throw in his face. “Go buy yourself something nice, sweetheart. And leave the important issues to the men.”

Then he stood, signaled to his cronies, who had been hovering in the wings, and left without a single backward glance.

## Chapter 2

*Berlin*  
*December 1932*

The fairy lights stretching between booths at the winter market blurred into stars as the cold tickled Althea James's eyes. Laughter coiled around her, tugging her deeper into the noise and bustle that filled an otherwise quiet square a few blocks from the much busier Potsdamer Platz.

The market hummed with life and celebration, despite everything Althea had heard about the economic uncertainty that continued to plague Germany long after the Great War had ended. Hunchbacked grandmas haggled over trinkets and roasted nuts with the sellers, everyone tucking joy behind serious expressions so that they wouldn't be swindled. Children giggled and darted through the crowd, couples strolled arm in arm, somewhere in the near distance a band played rousing songs while the voices of a roving chorus weaved themselves into the air to make it pulse and sparkle.

Berlin was magical and Althea was charmed, wooed, nearly under a spell. She found herself—as she had so often in the week since she'd arrived in the city—with her notebook in hand, desperate to capture the scene that was so much bigger and overwhelming than anything she'd experienced in her sheltered life growing up in rural Maine.

Professor Diedrich Müller, her liaison from Humboldt University, watched her with enough affection in the slant of his smile that it had her ducking her head and tucking everything away in the pocket of her winter coat.

“No, don't stop on my account. I was enjoying watching a famous writer at work,” Diedrich said, with the ease of someone apt at navigating socially awkward people.

The week before, when she'd stepped onto the docks at Rostock after her long trip from New York, she'd nearly tripped at the sight of him. She'd been informed that a literature professor would be waiting for her when she disembarked in Germany, but she'd pictured an older gentleman with a penchant for tweed jackets and esoteric poems. Not movie-star

gorgeous Diedrich Müller, with his warmed-honey hair, snow-melt-blue eyes and effortless charm that poured off him in waves.

Even his voice was appealing, with an accent that conjured images of gothic castles rising against rich pine trees and stories of big, bad wolves who ate little girls in one bite.

If she ever added him into a novel, her editor would deem him too perfect, too unrealistic.

“It’s not important,” she demurred, still not used to being looked at as if she had something interesting to say. Before her debut novel had caught the world’s attention so completely and unexpectedly, the only person she’d talked to with regularity had been her brother Joe. And he was family, so he didn’t have a choice. “Just silly scribblings.”

“Well, I hope you plan on including these ‘silly scribblings’ and other descriptions of our magnificent city in your next book.”

“Of course.” Althea supposed it was one of the reasons she’d been invited to Germany in the first place—to paint the country in a positive light.

She didn’t mention that she seemed to have lost her ability to tell a story ever since she’d been plucked out of obscurity by a twist of fate. Every time she tried to start her next novel, the blank pages mocked her. How was she supposed to follow up lightning in a bottle?

Even the notebooks she’d filled since arriving in Berlin were full of hollow words that didn’t quite live up to what she was seeing.

“There is nothing more beautiful than this city in winter,” Diedrich continued, handing over a cup of steaming mulled wine he’d procured for her. “Except perhaps a lady who can appreciate its splendor.”

Althea fought off a blush and wondered if she would ever get used to this man’s flirtations. “Only perhaps?”

A flash of white teeth in genuine amusement. *What a big mouth you have.* Did that make her Little Red Riding Hood?

Diedrich bent close, his lips brushing the shell of her ear. “Depends on the lady.”

Althea lost her battle with the flush that had been working its way up along her neck. He didn’t mean her, he couldn’t.

She had no delusions of her own beauty. It wasn’t that she thought herself unappealing, but she was the type who was always lauded for her intellect over her looks. Everything about her was plain, from her pleasant, forgettable face and eyes to the spattering of freckles that had been deemed cute when she’d been younger but now got her unsolicited advice on face powder.

She *had* made an attempt tonight to match the image he must have of the sophisticated, world-renowned author she was on paper. There wasn't much she could do with the heavy curtain of hair that never seemed to want to stay where she put it, but she had visited a boutique the day before—one of those kinds of shops that made her fearful of touching anything—to purchase a dress that wasn't two decades out of style.

The way Diedrich's smile had turned sultry when he'd seen her in it confirmed that the risk had been worth the expense.

After Althea finished the wine, Diedrich handed her a sweet pastry. "You have to sample all that the culture has to offer, my dear."

"Do you include yourself on that list, Professor Müller?" Althea asked, knowing her cheeks must be impossibly pink. She hoped he'd blame it on the cold.

"Miss James," he murmured, a pleased chastisement lurking in his tone, one she recognized only secondhand from nights parked in the furthest corner of her brother's pub back home. This was how men who were interested in a particular woman talked.

As she often did when she was flustered, Althea tried to imagine she was writing instead of living this scene. What would she do if she were the main character instead of the dowdy friend there simply to add contrast, if she were Lizzy Bennet instead of Charlotte Collins?

Gathering all her bravery, Althea took a half step in front of Diedrich, enough to turn back with a saucy smile before taking off at something much faster than their meandering stroll, the dare implicit.

*Catch me if you can.*

In letting go of Diedrich, Althea had thought she might get disoriented, overwhelmed. Becoming untethered from a companion in the midst of a crowd could leave one dizzy and nauseous. Especially here in a city she didn't know, where she only passably spoke the language.

But there was something about the market—shoulders brushed against hers, faces turned with absent half smiles, children pulled at the hem of her coat. Rather than being caught in an avalanche, uncontrolled and terrifying, Althea was just a single snowflake in a storm that was so much larger than herself.

It was how she'd felt since she'd stepped off the train in Berlin.

Before this trip, she'd only ever left Owl's Head once in her life and that had been to meet her editor in New York on the publication day of her novel. The thought of going to a different country by herself had been terrifying. More than once, she'd unpacked her bags.

What is the worst that could happen? she'd asked herself.



*You could die*, the fear whispered back.

What is the best?

*You could live.*

Althea had repacked her bags and left her cottage by the cliffs.

She'd always been safe in the worlds she created for her characters, and always slightly out of place in the real one. But in Berlin she seemed to fit.

It took her a few seconds to realize she'd stopped in the middle of the crowd. Then she noticed what she'd been staring at.

Books.

They reeled her in, a hook caught in the softness of her belly, the line snapping taut, tugging until she found herself in front of the merchant, her fingers hovering over the leather-bound volumes on display.

"The lady has excellent taste," the man said in English, though there were enough pauses between the words to signal that he wasn't exactly comfortable with the language.

"Reinmar von Hagenau," Althea breathed out, snatching her hand back so as not to leave accidental fingerprints on the treasure. Von Hagenau was a beloved *Minnesänger*—the German equivalent of a troubadour. He hailed from the twelfth century and had been well respected by the peers of his day, all of whom wrote lyrical poems and songs featuring courtly love and honor.

The merchant's eyes lingered on the book in the same way parents gazed at precocious children. When he looked up, he seemed to read in her face that she might be a kindred soul. "Too expensive, yes?"

Althea smiled and shrugged and tried in German: "I'm sorry."

"No, no." The merchant waved away her apology and then squatted down behind his table. He pulled up a thick book that, while hardback and sturdy, was clearly less decadent than the one on display. He held it out with both hands. "For you."

She took it, rubbing a palm over the cover to brush away the few flakes that had landed, and nearly gasped in pleasure when she saw the title. It was a simpler volume of the von Hagenau collection.

"How much?" Althea asked, digging for her coin purse. It would be more affordable than the version meant for collectors, certainly, but she still didn't know if she had enough with her. The money her publisher had offered for another novel had been life changing, but she'd been cautious about spending any, worried that they might demand it all back when she failed to produce work of the quality they expected.

"A gift," the merchant said, bowing slightly. He tapped the spot over

his heart once, and then pointed at her. “*Die Bücherfreundin.*”

“A friend of books,” Diedrich murmured from behind her, his palm heavy on her waist, his chest close enough it brushed against her back when he inhaled.

“*Die Bücherfreundin,*” Althea repeated to herself. The polite part of her wanted to insist on paying for the collection, but the cost of the perceived rejection of his generosity would be far higher than that of the book.

Instead she held up a finger, then dug in her satchel so she could pull out a copy of *Alice in Wonderland*, one that she’d brought along as a safety blanket, the parallels between herself and a disoriented and dazzled Alice dropped into Wonderland too strong not to find comforting.

“A gift,” she deliberately parroted, though she attempted it in German as he had in English.

He took it with the slightly shaking hands of the elderly, smiled once he realized what the book was, and then pressed it to himself in an approximation of a hug.

The man nodded once, an acknowledgment, a goodbye. And then turned his attention to another customer.

Althea wanted to linger, wanted to stay wrapped up in the experience, but Diedrich was already towing her along, and she trailed behind him toward the edges of the market, toward their dinner plans, and maybe toward their after-dinner plans if she continued to act as if she were the main character in the scene instead of the wallflower. If she continued to be Berlin’s version of Althea James.

While she’d thought she’d been successful in the market with her clumsy flirtations, her few attempts on the stroll along the Spree to dinner fell flat. Diedrich had slipped into a thoughtful silence that was uncharacteristic to what she’d been learning was his natural affinity for bright conversation. Their dinner was a quiet affair, then, because she’d never mastered the art of small talk. She spent the time worrying, turning over everything she’d said, wondering if she’d done something wrong.

Despite the fact that the international literary community seemed to view her as someone important, she truly was just a simple, unsophisticated girl. Even now as she took part in a cultural program designed to bring “well-known and respected authors” of German origin back to their home country for six-month residencies, she couldn’t help but feel like a fraud. Not only because she still hadn’t come to terms with the idea of herself as a real writer, but because she’d never thought of herself as anything but American.

Her grandparents hailed from a village outside Cologne, but all she'd really ever known of them were the names scribbled in the family Bible. And her mother had never shown any interest in her heritage. They were Americans, and no one would tell Marta James otherwise.

After Marta had died young, Althea had been too busy raising her brother the rest of the way into adulthood to think much of anything beyond whether they had enough money to buy sugar that week.

Still, even if Althea didn't feel connected to her German ancestors, the offer to come to Berlin had been too tempting to pass up. If she agreed to participate, she'd get a round-trip ticket, a stipend, an apartment in a safe neighborhood, and a liaison from a local university to help show her around. In return, she'd be asked to attend a few political and social gatherings, as well as give a handful of talks about *The Unfractured Light*, the novel that had shifted Althea from a hobbyist into the category of "well-known and respected."

She chewed on her bottom lip now, studying Diedrich's face carefully. The lines between his brows weren't deep, nor was his frown. Not anger, then, but contemplation.

Althea was about to try to lighten the mood—how, she wasn't sure—when Diedrich seemed to shake off whatever strange emotion had settled around his shoulders.

"You enjoy German literature," he said, with that smile he'd bestowed on her back in the market.

She basked in the warmth of it, relieved that she hadn't somehow lost his affections. "Yes."

Diedrich beamed. "May I offer a suggestion?"

"Please."

"It's one of my favorites." Diedrich shifted to withdraw a book with a red cover from his inside jacket pocket.

The flickering candlelight on their table caught gold lettering as his fingers caressed the worn binding. Whatever this was, it was clearly treasured, so much so that he carried it around with him.

The cover was simple and straightforward, nothing too elaborate.

"I would very much enjoy hearing your thoughts on it."

"Of course." Althea gave him the best smile she could as she tapped the title. *Mein Kampf*. She could read German better than she could converse or write in it, so the translation came easily. "My Struggle."

Diedrich gave an approving nod. "I am positive you will find it quite fascinating."

Although she didn't tend to gravitate toward autobiographies, Althea

was aware enough to recognize the name of the author as the head of the very party that was funding her trip to Berlin. To be polite, she murmured, "I'm sure I will."