

EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT

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THE

PARIS



LIBRARY

A Novel



CHAPTER 1



Odile

PARIS, FEBRUARY 1939

NUMBERS FLOATED ROUND my head like stars. 823. The numbers were the key to a new life. 822. Constellations of hope. 841. In my bedroom late at night, in the morning on the way to get croissants, series after series—810, 840, 890—formed in front of my eyes. They represented freedom, the future. Along with the numbers, I'd studied the history of libraries, going back to the 1500s. In England, while Henry VIII was busy chopping off his wives' heads, our King François was modernizing his library, which he opened to scholars. His royal collection was the beginning of the Bibliothèque Nationale. Now, at the desk in my bedroom, I prepared for my job interview at the American Library, reviewing my notes one last time: founded in 1920; the first in Paris to let the public into the stacks; subscribers from more than thirty countries, one-fourth of them from France. I held fast to these facts and figures, hoping they'd make me appear qualified to the Directress.

I strode from my family's apartment on the sooty rue de Rome, across from the Saint-Lazare train station, where locomotives coughed up smoke. The wind whipped my hair, and I tucked tendrils

under my tam hat. In the distance, I could see the dome of Saint-Augustin church. Religion, 200. Old Testament, 221. And the New Testament? I waited, but the number wouldn't come. I was so nervous that I forgot simple facts. I drew my notebook from my purse. Ah, yes, 225. I knew that.

My favorite part of library school had been the Dewey Decimal system. Conceived in 1873 by the American librarian Melvil Dewey, it used ten classes to organize library books on shelves based on subject. There was a number for everything, allowing any reader to find any book in any library. For example, Maman took pride in her 648 (housekeeping). Papa wouldn't admit it, but he really did enjoy 785 (chamber music). My twin brother was more of a 636.8 person, while I preferred 636.7. (Cats and dogs, respectively.)

I arrived on *le grand boulevard*, where in the space of a block, the city shrugged off her working-class mantle and donned a mink coat. The coarse smell of coal dissipated, replaced by the honeyed jasmine of Joy, worn by women delighting in the window display of Nina Ricci's dresses and Kislav green leather gloves. Farther along, I wound around musicians exiting the shop that sold wrinkled sheet music, past the baroque building with the blue door, and turned the corner, onto a narrow side street. I knew the way by heart.

I loved Paris, a city with secrets. Like book covers, some leather, some cloth, each Parisian door led to an unexpected world. A courtyard could contain a knot of bicycles or a plump concierge armed with a broom. In the case of the Library, the massive wooden door opened to a secret garden. Bordered by petunias on one side, lawn on the other, the white pebbled path led to the brick-and-stone mansion. I crossed the threshold, beneath French and American flags fluttering side by side, and hung my jacket on the rickety coatrack. Breathing in the best smell in the world—a mélange of the mossy scent of musty books and crisp newspaper pages—I felt as if I'd come home.

A few minutes early for the interview, I skirted the circulation desk, where the always debonair librarian listened to subscribers ("Where can a fella find a decent steak in Paris?" asked a newcomer

in cowboy boots. “Why should I pay the fine when I didn’t even finish the book?” demanded cantankerous Madame Simon.), and entered the quiet of the cozy reading room.

At a table near the French windows, Professor Cohen read the paper, a jaunty peacock feather tucked in her chignon; Mr. Pryce-Jones pondered *Time* as he puffed on his pipe. Ordinarily, I would have said hello, but nervous about my interview, I sought refuge in my favorite section of the stacks. I loved being surrounded by stories, some as old as time, others published just last month.

I thought I might check out a novel for my brother. More and more now, at all hours of the night, I would wake to the sound of him typing his tracts. If Rémy wasn’t writing articles about how France should aid the refugees driven out of Spain by the civil war, he was insisting that Hitler would take over Europe the way he’d taken a chunk of Czechoslovakia. The only thing that made Rémy forget his worries—which was to say the worries of others—was a good book.

I ran my fingers along the spines. Choosing one, I opened to a random passage. I never judged a book by its beginning. It felt like the first and last date I’d once had, both of us smiling too brightly. No, I opened to a page in the middle, where the author wasn’t trying to impress me. “There are darkneses in life and there are lights,” I read. “You are one of the lights, the light of all light.” *Oui. Merci*, Mr. Stoker. This is what I would say to Rémy if I could.

Now I was late. I hurried to the circulation desk, where I signed the card and slid *Dracula* into my purse. The Directress was waiting. As always, her chestnut hair was swept up in a bun, a silver pen poised in her hand.

Everyone knew of Miss Reeder. She wrote articles for newspapers and dazzled on the radio, inviting all to the Library—students, teachers, soldiers, foreigners, and French. She was adamant that there be a place here for everyone.

“I’m Odile Souchet. Sorry to be late. I was early, and I opened a book . . .”

“Reading is dangerous,” Miss Reeder said with a knowing smile. “Let’s go to my office.”

I followed her through the reading room, where subscribers in smart suits lowered their newspapers to get a better look at the famous Directress, up the spiral staircase and down a corridor in the sacred “Employees Only” wing to her office, which smelled of espresso. On the wall hung a large aerial photo of a city, its blocks like a chessboard, so different from Paris’s winding streets.

Noting my interest, she said, “That’s Washington, DC. I used to work at the Library of Congress.” She gestured for me to be seated and sat at her desk, which was covered by papers—some trying to sneak out of the tray, others held in place by a hole puncher. In the corner was a shiny black phone. Beside Miss Reeder, a chair held a batch of books. I spied novels by Isak Dinesen and Edith Wharton. A bookmark—a bright ribbon, really—beckoned from each, inviting the Directress to return.

What kind of reader was Miss Reeder? Unlike me, she’d never leave books open-faced for a lack of a *marque-page*. She’d never leave them piled under her bed. She would have four or five going at once. A book tucked in her purse for bus rides across the city. One that a dear friend had asked her opinion about. Another that no one would ever know about, a secret pleasure for a rainy Sunday afternoon—

“Who’s your favorite author?” Miss Reeder asked.

Who’s your favorite author? An impossible question. How could a person choose only one? In fact, my aunt Caro and I had created categories—dead authors, alive ones, foreign, French, etc.—to avoid having to decide. I considered the books in the reading room I’d touched just a moment ago, books that had touched me. I admired Ralph Waldo Emerson’s way of thinking: *I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me*, as well as Jane Austen’s. Though the authoress wrote in the nineteenth century, the situation for many of today’s women remained the same: futures determined by whom they married. Three months ago, when I’d informed my parents that I didn’t need a husband, Papa snorted and began bringing a different work subordinate to every Sunday lunch. Like the turkey Maman trussed and sprinkled with parsley, Papa presented each one on a

platter: “Marc has never missed a day of work, not even when he had the flu!”

“You do read, don’t you?”

Papa often complained that my mouth worked faster than my mind. In a flash of frustration, I responded to Miss Reeder’s first question.

“My favorite dead author is Dostoevsky, because I like his character Raskolnikov. He’s not the only one who wants to hit someone over the head.”

Silence.

Why hadn’t I given a normal answer—for example, Zora Neale Hurston, my favorite living author?

“It was an honor to meet you.” I moved to the door, knowing the interview was over.

As my fingers reached for the porcelain knob, I heard Miss Reeder say, “‘Fling yourself straight into life, without deliberation; don’t be afraid—the flood will bear you to the bank and set you safe on your feet again.’”

My favorite line from *Crime and Punishment*. 891.73. I turned around.

“Most candidates say their favorite is Shakespeare,” she said.

“The only author with his own Dewey Decimal call number.”

“A few mention *Jane Eyre*.”

That would have been a normal response. Why hadn’t I said Charlotte Brontë, or any Brontë for that matter? “I love Jane, too. The Brontë sisters share the same call number—823.8.”

“But I liked your answer.”

“You did?”

“You said what you felt, not what you thought I wanted to hear.”

That was true.

“Don’t be afraid to be different.” Miss Reeder leaned forward. Her gaze—intelligent, steady—met mine. “Why do you want to work here?”

I couldn’t give her the real reason. It would sound terrible. “I memorized the Dewey Decimal system and got straight As at library school.”

She glanced at my application. “You have an impressive transcript. But you haven’t answered my question.”

“I’m a subscriber here. I love English—”

“I can see that,” she said, a dab of disappointment in her tone. “Thank you for your time. We’ll let you know either way in a few weeks’ time. I’ll see you out.”

Back in the courtyard, I sighed in frustration. Perhaps I should have admitted why I wanted the job.

“What’s wrong, Odile?” asked Professor Cohen. I loved her standing-room-only lecture series, English Literature at the American Library. In her signature purple shawl, she made daunting books like *Beowulf* accessible, and her lectures were lively, with a soupçon of sly humor. Clouds of a scandalous past wafted in her wake like the lilac notes of her *parfum*. They said *Madame le professeur* was originally from Milan. A prima ballerina who gave up star status (and her stodgy husband) in order to follow a lover to Brazzaville. When she returned to Paris—alone—she studied at the Sorbonne, where like Simone de Beauvoir, she’d passed *l’agrégation*, the nearly impossible state exam, to be able to teach at the highest level.

“Odile?”

“I made a fool of myself at my job interview.”

“A smart young woman like you? Did you tell Miss Reeder that you don’t miss a single one of my lectures? I wish my students were as faithful!”

“I didn’t think to mention it.”

“Include everything you want to tell her in a thank-you note.”

“She won’t choose me.”

“Life’s a brawl. You must fight for what you want.”

“I’m not sure . . .”

“Well, I am,” Professor Cohen said. “Think the old-fashioned men at the Sorbonne hired me just like that? I worked damned hard to convince them that a woman could teach university courses.”

I looked up. Before, I’d only noticed the professor’s purple shawl. Now I saw her steely eyes.

“Being persistent isn’t a bad thing,” she continued, “though my father complained I always had to have the last word.”

“Mine too. He calls me ‘unrelenting.’”

“Put that quality to use.”

She was right. In my favorite books, the heroines never gave up. Professor Cohen had a point about putting my thoughts in a letter. Writing was easier than speaking face-to-face. I could cross things out and start over, a hundred times if I needed to.

“You’re right . . .,” I told her.

“Of course I am! I’ll inform the Directress that you always ask the best questions at my lectures, and you be sure to follow through.” With a swish of her shawl, she strode into the Library.

It never mattered how low I felt, someone at the Library always managed to scoop me up and put me on an even keel. The Library was more than bricks and books; its mortar was people who cared. I’d spent time in other libraries, with their hard wooden chairs and their polite “*Bonjour, Mademoiselle. Au revoir, Mademoiselle.*” There was nothing wrong with these *bibliothèques*, they simply lacked the camaraderie of real community. The Library felt like home.

“Odile! Wait!” It was Mr. Pryce-Jones, the retired English diplomat in his paisley bow tie, followed by the cataloger Mrs. Turnbull, with her crooked blue-gray bangs. Professor Cohen must have told them I was feeling discouraged.

“Nothing is ever lost.” He patted my back awkwardly. “You’ll win the Directress over. Just write a list of your arguments, like any diplomat worth his salt and pepper would.”

“Quit mollycoddling the girl!” Mrs. Turnbull told him. Turning to me, she said, “In my native Winnipeg, we’re used to adversity. Makes us who we are. Winters with temperatures of minus forty degrees, and you won’t hear us complain, unlike Americans. . . .” Remembering the reason she’d stepped outside—an opportunity to boss someone—she stuck a bony finger in my face. “Buck up, and don’t take no for an answer!”

With a smile, I realized that home was a place where there were no secrets. But I was smiling. That was already something.

Back in my bedroom, no longer nervous, I wrote:

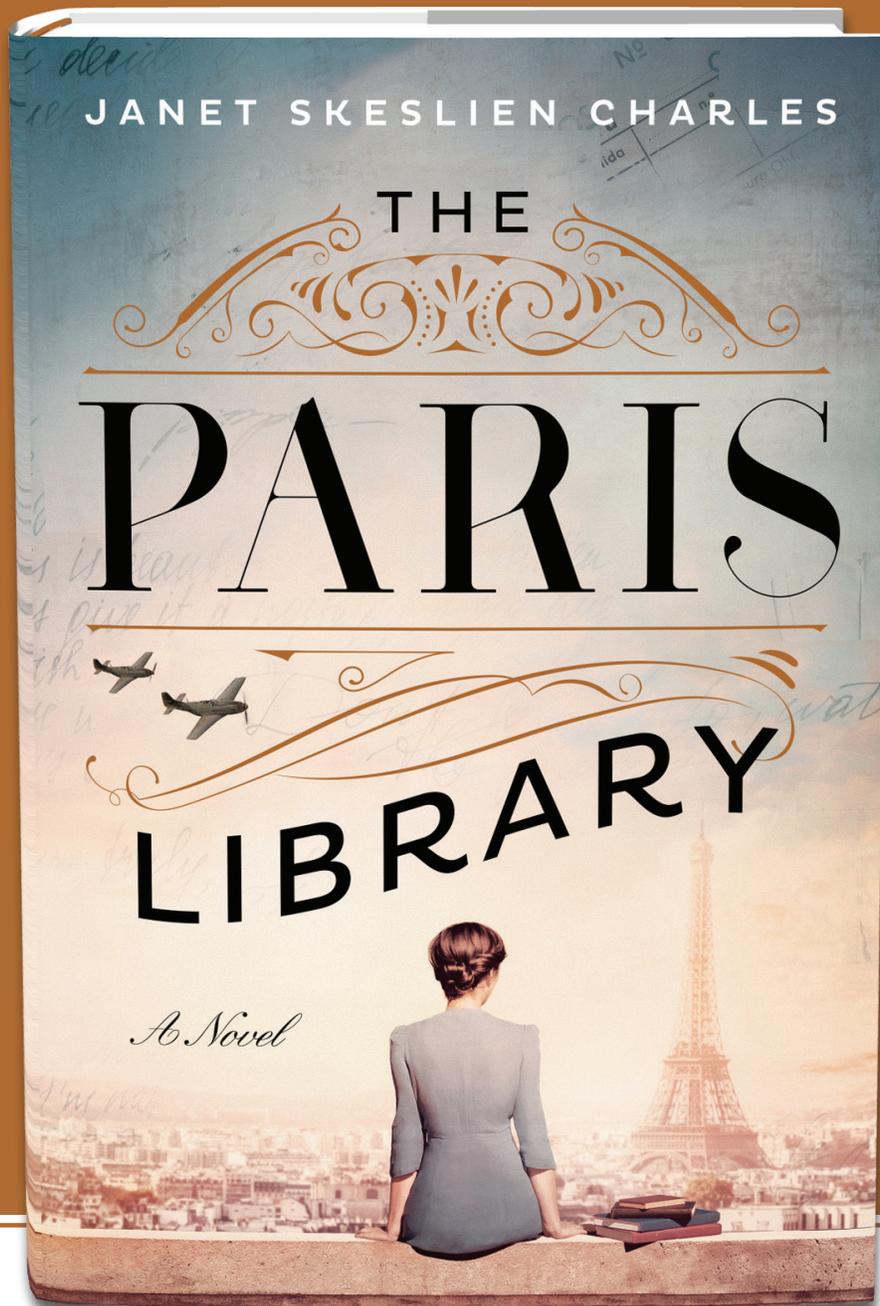
Dear Miss Reeder,

Thank you for discussing the job with me. I was thrilled to be interviewed. This library means more to me than any place in Paris. When I was little, my aunt Caroline took me to Story Hour. It's thanks to her that I studied English and fell in love with the Library. Though my aunt is no longer with us, I continue to seek her at the ALP. I open books and turn to their pockets in the back, hoping to see her name on the card. Reading the same novels as she did makes me feel like we're still close.

The Library is my haven. I can always find a corner of the stacks to call my own, to read and dream. I want to make sure everyone has that chance, most especially the people who feel different and need a place to call home.

I signed my name, finishing the interview.

ON SALE JUNE 2, 2020



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