

*The Girl From Vichy by Andie Newton – Chapter 1 Excerpt*

1942. Vichy, France.

I stopped running just under the large clock that hung above Gare de Vichy's stone archway, my heels skidding on the cobblestone ground. I had seen the clock hundreds, maybe even thousands of times before, having lived near Vichy my entire life, but this was the first time I heard it ticking and saw its pointed, metal hands actually moving. Across the street behind a kerbside flower cart was my sister, Charlotte, watering a blooming fuchsia hanging from a hook outside her maternity boutique. A feeling hand swept over her pregnant belly, and I tugged my beret down low.

Squeezing my pocketbook, I could all but feel the letter inside addressed to the Sisters of Notre Dame de la Compassion, asking them to take me in. They'd never know Mama was the one who wrote the note, forging it in Papa's best handwriting just moments ago in her kitchen.

'I want what you want,' Mama said as she slipped the note in my hand. A smile twitched on her lips, and I pretended not to notice.

'And for the almsgiving? I'll need a donation.'

Mama opened a drawer underneath the woodblock she used for cutting meat. Inside, bundles of francs tied with string. She counted them one by one, '*Un, deux, trois...*' until she had completely emptied the drawer.

'Give it all to the sisters to ensure a long stay.' Mama stuffed the money into my pocketbook along with some of her cigarettes and the cloisonné lighter from her pocket. 'Take only what you need for travel.'

I took a deep breath. My wedding to Gérard Baudoin, a gendarme in the Vichy police, was the following morning. An icy shiver waved over my body. *Marry a collaborator.*

The police had become goats to our new government under Philippe Pétain, the leader of the Free Zone. Papa believed, like many in Vichy, that it was best to support Pétain and his regime. He was our nation's hero, and we should trust him. But I believed what Mama said, that heroes don't send their soldiers to a *stammlager*—a German prison—or take orders from the Reich on how to run the Free Zone.

I pulled my wedding dress off its padded hanger and held it at eye level, yards of Mechlin lace hand-stitched into the bodice scrunching in my fists. A train of white satin pooled onto Mama's parquet floor. Papa arranged the marriage himself. *He will be angry, I thought, and hurt when he finds out I had left.*

Mama nudged the dress box on the floor, scooting it closer to me with her toe. 'Don't waste your time thinking about that collaborator.'

'Gérard?' I said. 'I'm not thinking about *him*.'

There was a moment of silence shared between us. Running away from a marriage I didn't want was one thing. Disappointing Papa was another.

'Stick to your plan,' she said. 'Hide out at the convent and let me take care of your father. He brought this upon himself, Adèle—cosying up to the regime as he has. Charlotte too, encouraging this marriage. Your life should be your own.'

I breathed in her words. '*Ma vie*.'

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Mama plunged her hands into her apron pockets. 'You choose your destiny.'

I dropped the dress into its box. Heaps of lace and crème fabric mushroomed from every corner, the smell of lily wafting from the sachets inside snuffed out like candles.

'Even if it means living with the nuns in Lyon?'

My words came out as a question, but I merely wanted to make sure Mama knew the stakes. Mama grew up Protestant, often saying that gold, crystal, and decoration inside the sanctuary were idols for the hypocrites.

'We do what we have to, Adèle.' Mama kicked the dress box, sending it sliding across her kitchen floor. 'When we have to.'

The box hit the back door and stopped next to the rubbish bin.