

## 1934

nnabel Clement was born to be a thief, just like her mother, her grandmother, and her great-grandfather before her. It was a responsibility she had taken seriously from the very first time her own mother had sat her down to explain that she was descended from the real Robin Hood—and that she was expected to carry on the family tradition. When she became a mother herself, she knew that as soon as her daughter was old enough to understand, she would share the legacy with her, too.

"It is who we are," Annabel explained a few days after Colette's sixth birthday, pulling her close in their apartment in the eleventh arrondissement of Paris, miles away from the West Yorkshire village where she'd been raised. She had fallen in love at eighteen and followed her new husband across the Channel to his native France. On this evening, Roger, a school headmaster who had never warmed to Annabel's calling, was working late, leaving Colette and Annabel alone. "It is who you are born to be. When you turn ten, I'll teach you how to steal, just as my mother taught me at that age."

"But stealing is wrong, Mum," Colette said in a small voice. "Isn't it?"

Annabel loved that the girl addressed her with the British term of endearment rather than the French *Maman*. It made her feel a bit less homesick for her own hometown, tucked into England's Barnsdale Forest. "It is only wrong in a world that is black and white, darling. If you can take from people who are cruel and unkind and use what you've taken to make the world a better place, then what you have done is heroic, not criminal. It is your destiny, Colette."

Colette's face scrunched in concentration. "Then why can't I learn to steal *now*?"

Annabel chuckled. "It's important that you understand first why we do what we do. That's why we always start with the history in our family. The stories are who we are."

Colette sighed. "Very well, Mum."

Annabel smiled down at her. "Once upon a time, in the village of Wentbridge, lived a man named Robin Hood. He felt strongly, as do I, that no one who has earned his money or his worldly possessions honestly should be parted from them, even if he's far richer than anyone should be. But he who has evil in his heart, or has used his fortune to bring harm to others, no longer has a claim on his property. Those are the people Robin stole from then, and they're the people we steal from now."

"But why did he steal, Mum?" Colette asked, looking up at Annabel with wide eyes. "What happened to him?"

"You see, the king at the time was a bad man, who was making life worse and worse for his subjects. Robin and his friends tried to get by, but the taxes grew and grew, and soon, the local sheriff started to imprison those who didn't have the ability to pay. 'We must make a change, then,' Robin decided, and he began to

free those who'd been falsely imprisoned and to take back the things that had been stolen from the townspeople."

"He was a hero, then."

"That he was, my darling. And do you want to hear my favorite part of the story?"

Colette nodded. "Yes, Mum."

Annabel smiled and pulled Colette closer. "High above the Barnsdale Forest, near Wentbridge, where Robin lived, flew a white-tailed eagle who believed in Robin's quest for justice. He looked over Robin and his men, keeping them safe. When there was danger, he called out, 'Kyi-kyi-kyi!' Can you say that?"

"Kyi-kyi-kyi!" Colette repeated with a grin.

Annabel threw her head back and trilled, "Ko-ko-ko." She smiled down at Colette. "That's how the eagle always ended every call. To this day, that's the way a white-tailed eagle sounds, if you listen closely enough. I've always thought it sounded a bit like, 'Come, come, come,' as if the descendants of that first eagle are urging us to follow him into adventure."

"Did you hear the eagle?" Colette asked. "When you were my age?"

Annabel nodded, a wave of homesickness washing over her. She loved Paris, and of course she loved Roger, but there would always be a piece of her heart in England. "Every day of my childhood, my darling. You'll hear it one day, too."

Four years later, on the day Colette turned ten, Annabel sat her down again, just as her own mother had done with her a generation before.

"I've told you stories of your forefather since you were old enough to understand," Annabel said gently, staring into the wide green eyes of her firstborn. Annabel and Roger had just welcomed their second child, a daughter named Liliane, who lay sleeping beside them in her bassinet. One day, Annabel would teach her about her legacy, too. "Now it is time for you to begin following in his footsteps."

"I'm ready, Mum."

"You must promise me, my sweet Colette," Annabel said, "that wherever you go, you will never forget who you were born to be."

Colette nodded solemnly. "I promise."

"And," Annabel had said, leaning in to whisper, "you mustn't tell Papa." She felt guilty asking Colette to keep secrets, but she knew that Roger would put a stop to Colette's training if he knew. Over the years, he had tolerated Annabel's need to steal, but he had never approved of it. Early in their marriage, she had often come home with a new piece to fence, wanting to tell him about all the good she would do with the proceeds, but his face always hardened into a scowl, and he held up his hands to stop her from speaking, saying that the less he knew, the better. As time had gone on, she had mostly stopped trying. "You must keep this between just the two of us."

"I know," Colette said, casting a nervous glance toward their apartment door, through which her father might enter at any moment. "But why doesn't he care for what you do, Mum?"

A lump rose in Annabel's throat. "To some people, stealing is a crime, no matter the reason. But I firmly believe that as long as we ensure that we only take from those who are cruel, and we always find a way to help those who are kind, we are on the side of God."

"Then Papa will understand one day. He has to."

"I hope you're right, Colette. But enough of that. Let's begin with our training, shall we?"

Annabel started not with lessons about undoing clasps and distracting marks, but rather with etiquette sessions so that Colette would easily blend in wherever she went. She taught her daughter everything from the correct forks to use to how to politely exit a conversation without giving up any personal information. On weekends, they took long walks to the Bois de Boulogne, the closest thing Paris had to the Barnsdale Forest, so that Colette could learn to run long distances over rough terrain, to forage, and to climb trees, all things that would help her to survive should a robbery ever go wrong.

On the afternoons when Roger worked late, Colette and Annabel huddled at the kitchen table, their heads bent together, practicing how to unhook all types of jewelry clasps, how to free cuff links, even how to jostle people so that in their startlement, they wouldn't notice rings being slipped from their fingers.

Colette stole her first piece in the summer of 1938, an elegant Longines pocket watch slipped from the vest of a Swiss banker named Vallotton who had swindled dozens of Parisians out of their life savings. He had a few friends high up in the police prefecture, and he had become untouchable; the authorities simply looked the other way while he destroyed people's lives.

"I'm nervous, Mum," Colette said softly as they finished their drinks—a glass of wine for Annabel, a *citron pressé* for Colette—at the café Vallotton frequented. He was a creature of routine—he ordered a Ricard on the terrace of the same café each day at precisely five o'clock—which made him very easy to target. He was the perfect mark for Colette's first score.

"Don't be worried, my dear," Annabel said, putting her hand over her daughter's and giving a comforting squeeze. "Vallotton is notoriously self-absorbed. He's the easiest type of person to steal from, for he won't even notice your existence." At five o'clock on the dot, Vallotton strode up to the café, sliding like an oil slick into his usual chair. Annabel's heart thudded as she watched her daughter study the man. Colette's eyes were sharp and calculating, but her hands trembled.

"Steady, my darling," Annabel murmured. "Remember, this is who you were born to be."

Taking a deep breath, Colette nodded and stood from the table. Annabel stood, too, leaving a bit of money for the waiter, and the two of them began to exit the café, weaving by Vallotton's table. As Annabel watched, her little girl squared her shoulders and jostled against Vallotton as they passed.

"Hey!" the man exclaimed, whirling around in his seat. "Watch where you're going!"

"I'm very sorry, sir, very sorry," Colette said quickly, keeping her eyes downcast just in case Vallotton tried to get a good look at her face, but as Annabel knew would be the case, he hardly looked at her at all. While Colette continued to stammer an apology, she simultaneously unhooked the watch and slipped it from Vallotton's front pocket into the folds of her dress in one fluid motion.

"They shouldn't allow children in cafés, I've always said," Vallotton grumbled, shooting an accusatory glare at Annabel, who turned her head and looked away to ensure that Vallotton wouldn't be able to describe her later, if it came to that.

"Oh, yes, sir, quite right, sir," she said cheerfully. "They're the scourge of the earth." And then, without looking back, she and Colette strolled casually out to the sidewalk and turned right, heading away from the café.

"Mum," Colette said the moment they'd turned the corner. "I did it! I really did it!" Her cheeks were pink with excitement,

her eyes glistening. "Do you think Robin Hood would be proud, Mum?"

"I know he would be," Annabel said, blinking back tears of pride. "And so am I. You're going to do so much good in the world, my love. I can't wait to see what the future brings."