

A woman with red hair styled in an updo, wearing a high-collared, long-sleeved historical dress with a floral pattern. She is standing in an ornate room with a large, gilded mirror in the background. Her hands are clasped near her chin.

Claire

EMMA LEADS

historical roman

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*I am dedicating this book to my cousin who
died prematurely*

*Manon Hardy
27 November 1962 - 10 October 2004*

*During the happiest time of her life, God blew
out her candle with a sigh*

Chapter 1

Séte 2015

Julia hears banging in the attic. She closes her laptop and enters the hallway.

'Is everything okay up there?'

Something falls over and Julia hears her daughter swear. Shaking her head, Julia re-enters the room and sits down at the table. Suddenly, she hears her daughter thunder down the stairs.

'Mum, do you have any idea what this is?' Ellie appears in front of her. Her hair is covered in cobwebs and there's a black smudge on her cheek. Her clothes are dusty and when she plops down on a chair, a dust cloud rises up.

Julia doesn't immediately respond and instead gazes at her daughter's hand in surprise.

'Look, mum, an old notebook, it's nearly falling apart.'

She tosses it down on the table irreverently. Then she gets up.

'I'm going to get a drink. Do you want anything, mum?'

Julia shakes her head. 'No, thank you, darling.'

'If you're looking for your glasses...' Ellie points to her head.

'What?' Julia feels along her head and finds her glasses. She places them on the tip of her

nose.

Ellie laughs as she leaves the room.

'Don't laugh at me, young lady! And bring me some iced tea!'

From the kitchen comes an answer that sounds like it might be an 'okay'. Julia pushes her glasses up her nose and takes hold of the notebook.

'Mum, I could use some furniture. There's plenty in the attic. It just needs some work. Is it alright if Patrick drops by to pick some up?' Ellie puts the glasses on the table.

'Yes, yes, sure, Ellie, take whatever you need. Where did you find this notebook?'

'It fell from one of the lower cupboards. By the way, we'll be taking that cupboard and using it as firewood.'

Julia nods, inspecting the notebook from all angles.

'Mum, are you even listening to me?'

Julia looks at her. 'Sorry, love, what were you saying?' She sips from her lemon iced tea. 'Is the cupboard no longer usable?'

'No, mum, I've set it aside to take to ours. It's a tad damaged, but I'll take care of that.'

Julia opens the notebook. Her eyes widen.

'Mum, what does it say?'

'Cette 1839,' Julia reads, baffled. 'My grand-mère once said, never be afraid to take a step towards people you don't know.'

Ellie looks at her mother in surprise and flops onto the chair. 'Do continue.'

Julia regards her mysteriously. 'I do believe

you've found a hidden gem.'

'Go on, mum, what does it say?'

Julia nods and clears her throat.

'I am Claire Leonora Hodiament.'

Ellie's eyes light up. 'Mum, that's...'

Julia nods and turns the page.

Chapter 2

Cette 1838

‘See you Monday, Justine.’ I tried to gently close the dark door to her office, but had to pull hard to get it to shut. I started to apologise for the resulting bang, but saw through the window that Justine hadn’t even noticed. She was once again fully immersed in the pattern before her.

‘Have a good night, Claire.’ Celise walked by. She pushed a loose lock of dark hair back into her bun and straightened her skirt. Before I could respond, she entered the shop, which contained a few more customers.

The hardwood floor in the hallway was weathered and the brick wall felt chilly. There was a musty smell, especially after days of rain. The ceiling, which must have been beautiful once, was covered in a layer of green. The door to the outside was usually open; we only locked it once it got dark out or whenever it rained, like today. Stacks of boxes could be found piled up to the windowsill against the opposite wall, which mainly consisted of windows. I attempted to find my way to the back door.

Minou had dragged some boxes to the workshop and several mannequins had to be moved to gain entry to the space. The

workshop and the shop itself seemed to become smaller every week. Half the brick wall had been painted white last week. It made the room look more spacious, Justine had said, and she had asked for beams with irons to be placed on the ceiling. Together, they formed a shelf that held rolls of fabric.

Large tables had been set up in rows. One table was being used to cut the fabric, something you could tell from the remains beneath it. Another table was used for drawing. This table was the tidiest. Even the colouring pencils were placed side by side, sorted by colour, clearly Minou's doing.

Right now, most girls were occupying the third table, I noticed. Some were using the machines and others stood on the other side to guide the fabric. They were laughing at something.

'Have a lovely weekend, girls!' I shouted.

'You too, Claire!' was the response.

I continued to walk. My dress got caught on a box, causing me to be tugged sideways, trip, and I was just able to keep myself upright using the door handle.

I turned around, annoyed, and freed my skirt.

Minou was just leaving the workshop.

'Minou, should we tidy everything on Monday? Before there are any accidents.'

She gave me a heated look and put her hands on her wide hips. 'We will. Now go home, Claire; it's finally dry and Justine will be angry if she notices you're still here.'

'I'm going, see you on Monday.' I pulled open the back door, stepped into the cold, and closed the door behind me.

The old gasman walked past, dressed fully in black. He was carrying a long rod and several accessories were hanging from his belt. He tipped his hat. 'Keep on walking, mademoiselle, you should be careful, all alone in this alley. My colleague is working in the large shopping street, hurry on over there.' He placed a hook on the rod and used it to move the lid off the lamppost. A burning canister was hanging from the rod, which he removed and fixed to the top of the hook. He carefully held the flame to the now visible wick and the lamp sputtered to life.

I continued on. It indeed wasn't the best idea to linger for too long.

The church bells struck six o'clock when I entered the large shopping street. A girl with her hair in two braids ran into me and looked at me in surprise. Behind her was an older girl, who appeared angry.

'Excuse me, mademoiselle.' I stroked the little girl's head.

The older girl grabbed her hand and pulled her away. 'Come on, Margot, and be more

careful in the future.'

I watched them leave and heard her say: 'See what happens when you don't pay attention?'

The little girl nodded.

Lady Coultier left the shop and descended the stairs. Her coachman was behind her. He was carrying a large box, containing the ball gown Lady Coultier would be wearing tonight at the Christmas ball the mayor's wife had organised.

My hands still hurt from all the pearls and sequins I had sewn onto the dress, but it had been worth it: the result was beautiful.

Lady Coultier's carriage passed me by and I felt the air shift.

I raised the collar on my coat and continued along the Grand Marchal shopping street. Not many people were out and about. It was getting dark.

The pianist of the little café 'Du Cloussard' hit the keys harshly. I grinned. He was trying to sing a song in an attempt to be heard over the crowd. Judging by the men's laughter, he wasn't succeeding. Many men drank their weekly allowance here.

From the Grand Marchal, I continued on into the city centre. It started to rain again. I pulled my hood up over my hair and set a brisker pace.

Suddenly, I heard someone running. The

footsteps could be heard easily in the quiet streets; they echoed against the walls of the buildings.

‘Stop!’ I heard someone else shout.

Instead of the person heeding the warning, I heard the footsteps speed up and head in my direction. I broke out into a cold sweat. I looked around me. Time to get out of here! I ran through the narrow streets as fast as I could. I only wanted one thing: to get home as quickly as possible.

I had almost reached my street when I was knocked over. I slammed into the wall. The other person, who had also lost their balance, fell against me. Wild, dark eyes looked into my own. He sniffed disapprovingly and disappeared around the corner in a matter of seconds. His footsteps disappeared into the distance.