

Prologue

Paris, 1772

'Push Madame, push!' In a lavishly furnished room, a midwife sat at the foot of a grand bed covered in velvet and silk. She had suppressed a tut at the waste of such finery; when would the rich learn that for occasions such as this, simple linen would suffice?

Marie bore down, clenching her teeth so tightly she was sure they would shatter. Her blonde hair was drenched with sweat, matted into thick clumps which stuck to her face and neck. As a fresh wave of pain swept through her, she released a scream unable to keep this one at bay. She wanted to stop, she wanted so desperately for this to be over. Twice she had been through this pain, and yet it was no easier. In fact, it just as terrifying as the first time, if not more so. The first time she had borne a daughter, healthy but disappointing nonetheless. A son was what she had wanted, what Phillippe had wanted. Still, a healthy daughter had been nothing to scoff at. Sons would follow.

But the son that had followed had not even drawn his first breath.

'Please make it stop,' Marie begged. The memory of her stillborn son was just as painful as the child she was bringing forth now. What if her memories poisoned this one and it was stillborn? Would it be her fault?

'Madame it's almost over, one more push.' Gritting her teeth one more, Marie pushed and forced the child into the world. There was a tense silence and Marie propped herself up on the lavin bed. Silk sheets and velvet blankets, she didn't even give a thought to them being ruined.

'What is it?' She said, her voice was weak and hoarse. 'Why doesn't he cry?' Tears of grief stung her eyes, her throat closed tightly, and she could taste a lump of salt forming at the back of her mouth. No! At the sound of a high-pitched wail she felt relief flood through her veins and seep into her stomach. She leant to the side and opened her mouth to release the bile which had built up.

'Madame, you have given birth to a beautiful daughter.'

'A daughter?' The bile creased and rose once more, and Marie let out a wail. All of this, all this pain, and for what? She didn't need another daughter. Even as the girl was placed in her arms the bitterness did not subside. She stared down at the delicate bundle, unfeeling. Phillippe would not be happy, he would want a son. And until she gave him one, she would have to repeat this ordeal. How many times would she have to go through this?

'Madame you must not despair, the next one will be a son.' Marie shook her head; no. Perhaps she was cursed to carry only daughters. 'Madame please, you are young. Your own mother bore two healthy daughters before she began to have sons.' The words were meant to bring her comfort, but Marie only burst into tears. In her arms the small bundle began to wave, thrashing her arms around her. Quickly the new born was removed from its mother's arms and handed over to the wet-nurse.

'What will you name her?' The midwife smiled encouragingly, trying her best to draw Marie out of her mood. She couldn't blame the poor girl for her misery, she was young, barely into her twentieth year and yet she had already suffered through three pregnancies. Once she was rested, she would feel better. 'Madame, please.'

'Odette,' Marie shrugged, 'if it pleases my husband then we shall call her Odette.' The name held no meaning for her; neither she nor Phillippe had discussed a name for another girl. They had not paused to consider it would be a daughter. She had been sure it would be a son; God owed her a son after he had taken her first!

Closing her eyes Marie settled back on the bed, blocking her ears to the sound of the crying babe. She just wanted to sleep. Let the midwife give the disappointing news; she could not bear to see Philippe's face when he learnt of her failure.

Over on the rue de Moulins a second woman was giving birth. She had none of the opulence and luxury that Marie had. Instead she lay on an old straw-filled mattress and soiled wool blankets. No midwife was in attendance, instead her only companion was a prostitute. The room was dimly lit with only two tallow candles. The room stank with the stench of the tallow candles mixed with sweat and other unpleasant body odours.

Noemi clamped the piece of leather between her teeth even tighter and writhed on the mattress as another wave of torture hit her. She yearned to turn her head and vomit, but her stomach was empty. When had she last eaten, or even drunk? It felt like days had passed since her labour had begun. She was exhausted, as the woman beside her urged her to push, Noemi could only shake her head. She was defeated; she just wanted it to be over. She knew she would die, her body was wracked and torn. Even if she survived, what would she do? She would be turned out of the brothel; who would want a woman fresh from childbirth?

'Madam has asked if the child is born?' A door to the room creaked open, letting a slither of light from a candle in. Noemi groaned at the dense light and turned her face away.

'No...and I fear they will both die at this rate. Noemi...'

'What will we do if the child survives?' The thought made Noemi's blood run cold, what would they do with her child? A boy would surely be left on the steps of Notre-Dame, what use would a boy be to a brothel of women? She opened her mouth to try and speak, but her mouth had gone dry. Her body was drenched in sweat, yet her mouth felt as dry as sand.

'Noemi don't talk, you need your strength.' The conversation faded into the distance as Noemi's head fell back onto the mattress. There was another strike of pain, this one sharp and confined to her lower body. She opened her mouth and spit the leather out, she had no energy to scream anymore and she was sure she would only choke on the foul thing.

'Get the Madam, we need a doctor...'

'She will not be happy.'

'Noemi has earned more than enough for a doctor, Madam owes her that much at least.' Did she? Noemi wondered, she had brought in enough patrons. But she was less than popular than the women. And to get herself into such a foolish position. How had this happened? She had always been so careful, so why now?

Drifting in and out of darkness when Noemi pulled herself back into the present, she found there were now four people in the cramped basement room with her. Their voices melded into one, she heard words repeated such as forceps, steps and work but everything had lost meaning. Closing her eyes, she let out a weak sigh. *I'm sorry little one*, she thought. She had never imagined having a child, but had she ever envisioned one, the life it was going to have was not what she would have wanted.

'Noemi is pretty enough, perhaps if it is a girl, we can put her to some use when she is old enough. She can act as servant until then.' No, Noemi shook her head, but she didn't think her body was capable of movement anymore. She was sinking into a blanket nothing, she was certain she was dying. Should she fight it? Should she try to stay alive to protect her child? But what protection could she offer?

Notre-Dame. Would it be so bad? If it was a son and he was left on the steps, surely, he would be accepted into the church. A girl though...she would at least be guaranteed shelter. If she had to die, at least let her child be a girl. Of

course, Noemi didn't wish for her daughter to grow up to be like her mother, to be a prostitute. But she would at least have somewhere to lay her head. Even if the Madam did not think she would prove useful as a prostitute, as a serving girl she would still be of use. Patrons would not want to see a boy wandering among them. But a girl they would ignore, she would be virtually faceless. God willing, she would be safe.

A small moan escaped Noemi as she felt something pulled from within her. Had she had the strength she would have screamed, it was as if something was being ripped from inside of her. Which she supposed it was. A cry filled the air, muffling slowly before mercifully there was silence.

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