

THE PARIS
LABYRINTH

GILLES
LEGARDINIER

Flammarion

THE PARIS LABYRINTH

By the same author

- L'Exil des anges*, Fleuve Éditions, 2009; Pocket, 2010
Nous étions les hommes, Fleuve Éditions, 2011; Pocket, 2014
Demain j'arrête !, Fleuve Éditions, 2011; Pocket, 2012
Complètement cramé !, Fleuve Éditions, 2012; Pocket, 2014
Et soudain tout change, Fleuve Éditions, 2013; Pocket, 2014
Ça peut pas rater !, Fleuve Éditions, 2014; Pocket, 2016
Quelqu'un pour qui trembler, Fleuve Éditions, 2015; Pocket, 2017
Le premier miracle, Flammarion, 2016; J'ai lu, 2017
Une fois dans ma vie, Flammarion, 2017; J'ai lu, 2018
Vaut-il mieux être toute petite ou abandonné à la naissance ?, with Mimie Mathy, Belfond 2017; Le Livre de Poche, 2018
Comme une ombre, with Pascale Legardinier, J'ai lu, 2018
J'ai encore menti !, Flammarion, 2018
Les phrases interdites si vous voulez rester en couple, with Pascale Legardinier, J'ai lu, 2019

The Paris Labyrinth is the author's first work to be translated into English.

GILLES LEGARDINIER

THE PARIS
LABYRINTH

A NOVEL

RESEARCH AND DOCUMENTATION
Chloé Legardinier

TRANSLATED FROM FRENCH BY
Kate Robinson

Flammarion

Endpapers: Detail from *The Paris of the 1889 World's Fair*.
New Map of Paris, Divided into 20 Arrondissements, © BnF.

Originally published in French as *Pour un instant d'éternité*
© Flammarion, S.A., Paris, 2019

English-language edition
© Flammarion, S.A., Paris, 2021

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form
or by any means, electronic, photocopy, information retrieval
system, or otherwise, without written permission from
Flammarion, S.A.

87, quai Panhard et Levassor
75647 Paris Cedex 13

editions.flammarion.com

21 22 23 3 2 1

ISBN: 978-2-0802-3969-3

Legal Deposit: 05/2021

*To those who feel like strangers in this world;
to those who doubt their ability to protect their loved ones
from what the future holds, who wonder where to look for hope,*

*I say this: do not dread the days ahead,
but accept nothing without discernment.*

*Follow your heart, be prepared to serve or to resist
with all of your might, or to wage battle, even.*

Do not be afraid to call upon your imagination.

No path is forbidden.

*The best paths are still secret, and at the heart of our best self
is the only key that will unleash the possibilities.*

It was dark, with a chill in the air. In the tree-filled gardens of a mansion in a wealthy Parisian neighborhood, five men stood guard on the immense lawn sprawling behind the building. The glow of lanterns projected their long shadows onto the surrounding plants. The men were armed with revolvers, loaded and ready to fire. Alert, they scanned the area, listening carefully.

In the center of the perimeter that they had formed stood a man who was beginning to lose his patience. Dressed in a luxurious fur-collared coat and a meticulously polished top hat, he glanced periodically at his pocket watch. He'd waited months for this meeting. If, in one minute, the person he was expecting did not appear, the delay would not go unpunished.

The clatter of iron-rimmed wheels on cobblestones in a nearby street caught his attention. He knew, however, that the strange individual with whom he had an appointment would not arrive by carriage. Vincent always appeared as if by magic. He was surprising in every sense of the word. It was difficult to say how old he was; impossible to know where he lived; even his surname was a mystery. And yet he was well known by the powerful and wealthy, for whom he worked with the greatest discretion.

The clop of horseshoes rang out as the carriage continued on without stopping.

Suddenly, a silhouette emerged from a grove of trees, right under the nose of a guard holding a lantern, who grunted, taken by surprise in spite of his watchful vigilance. His companions took aim,

then relaxed as the man in the coat spoke a few words in a foreign language.

“You know how to make an entrance, Vincent,” he greeted his visitor in a Russian accent. “You almost frightened me.”

“Please forgive me, Your Highness. It’s a risk that comes with the profession.”

Athletic in build, Vincent made his way across the grass with a light step. Unlike his illustrious client, he was not dressed in the latest fashion. Nor did he wear a hat or cap, which was unthinkable for anyone else, except perhaps a young child. His dark, close-fitting clothes gave no indication of profession or social status. The fabric was of good quality, but the style might befit a laborer. Was he a craftsman of some unidentified trade? A circus tightrope walker? A thief? No doubt a bit of all three.

The man in the coat avoided his handshake and barked, “I hope you’re not going to inform me of a delay.”

“Have I ever kept you waiting?”

“No, I must admit, you have not. Everything is ready then? After entrusting my home to you all winter, can I move in safely now—at last?”

“I think so, Your Highness.”

“You think so? Must I be satisfied with what you *think*? Are you aware of the danger for an exiled prince here in your capital, with everyone flocking in for this preposterous World’s Fair?”

“A crowd is a much better guarantee of secrecy and safety than any secluded retreat, Your Highness.”

“I am not counting on a crowd in order to escape an attempt on my life; I am counting on your plan.”

“You may indeed.”

“How can I be certain? You are costing me a fortune, my dear Vincent, and though you have a reputation for being the best at your craft, I do not want to be the victim of your first mistake.”

Vincent took a step forward, calmly breaching the distance that propriety imposed between a modest service provider and his prestigious client. He lowered his voice.

“Your Highness, I would like to offer you a deal that will give you complete peace of mind.”

Disconcerted by the sudden proximity, the man in the coat stiffened, but steeled himself from backing away.

“You’ll get neither more time, nor more gold than we agreed upon.”

“I ask for neither.”

Vincent paused to take a deep breath before adding, “When you asked me to create an entirely undetectable shelter, you trusted me with your life.”

“That’s right.”

“Would you be reassured if I did the same?”

“What do you mean?”

Vincent didn’t respond. He glanced around, savoring the moment. Each time he delivered a secret passage or a hidden room, he particularly enjoyed presenting it to the client, even when fewer risks were required than this evening. It represented the result of several months of hard work for him and his team. In that moment, his clients, as important as they might be, were obliged to listen to him with the greatest respect and to treat him as an equal. Nothing less than their safety or their most secret desire was at stake. Rank, title, and fortune dissolved, leaving just two men, face to face. He felt that only under these conditions did civilization reveal its true nature. The rest was a charade.

Certain that he now had his listener’s full attention, Vincent murmured, “If you gave them the order, Your Highness, your bodyguards would not hesitate to kill me. Isn’t that right?”

The prince seemed embarrassed at having to answer, but Vincent’s steady gaze left him no choice.

“Of course, but why would I do that?”

“To prove that my work can save your life, let me risk my own.” Vincent drew closer and whispered, “I’m going to make a run for it and hide in your mansion.”

“But . . .”

“Order your escort to follow me and kill me. Without warning or mercy.”

“Have you lost your mind?”

“If I survive, you will be reassured, because you will have personally witnessed the system’s effectiveness.”

“And if they kill you?”

“Then you shall keep your gold, and I beg you to accept my corpse as respectful evidence of my shame for having failed.”

The man in the coat hesitated. He looked back and forth from Vincent to his men.

“I am warning you, Vincent,” he said finally. “They are loyal assassins. They will not fake it.”

“Your Highness, no one survives by faking it.”

Vincent set off in the moonlight. No sooner had he left the lawn than the prince barked his order in his incomprehensible language, in a tone that brooked no discussion. His men raced after Vincent like a pack of wolves on the hunt, silent and determined.

Vincent was not afraid. Ironically, he was happy. He ran at a steady pace. A form of elation arose in him. Without slowing, he leaped over flowerbeds and sidestepped obstacles on his way towards the mansion. The prince's bodyguards were in hot pursuit. Vincent knew that to avoid alerting the policemen on patrol in the wealthy neighborhood, they would rather stab him than shoot him. They could not kill him from a distance, which would give him a few extra yards of safety.

He bounded up the back terrace steps, entered the sitting room that looked out over the gardens, and stole a glance behind him. In the darkness, he could not tell how much distance separated him from his pursuers. Oh, well. In any case, it would be a close match.

Without a moment's hesitation, he stepped into the hallway leading to the front of the building. Vincent could hear his pursuers' voices, but he was too concentrated to entertain worry. In fact, he saw this test as just a game, really. He was risking his life, but that didn't matter much to him. He was no longer aware of the fragility of existence. He knew how useless it was, in the rush of the moment, to think of the future. What mattered was to be present, to give in to the moment entirely without thinking of anything else, and to count on there being an afterwards. Living is an act of picking

oneself up from the minutes preceding the present moment. He'd certainly had the opportunity to learn how.

What was now taking place was nothing more than an ordinary game of hide-and-seek, like the ones he enjoyed so much back when his life was uncomplicated. This evening, however, he was treated to a much more sophisticated hiding place and far less friendly opponents. If he were so unfortunate as to lose, he would not be able to laugh and pick himself up again.

He stopped running halfway down the hallway when he found himself between two alcoves where imposing Greek statues stood facing each other. A goddess and a god: Aphrodite and Ares, love and war. Vincent slipped behind the goddess. He would need her benevolent protection, for his pursuers had already swarmed the living areas.

He wrapped his arms around the goddess, respectfully embracing the folds of her stone robe. With his foot, he triggered the secret mechanism located behind the pedestal, immediately setting the entire alcove into motion. Like an elevator, it descended towards the basement, taking Vincent, still clinging to the life-saving statue, with it. With a swift vertical movement, the alcove was replaced by an exact reproduction lowered from above. It was a perfect replica.

Supported by a complex set of pulleys and counterweights, Vincent's alcove landed softly in a secret room constructed in the bowels of the building's foundation. If necessary, a person could stay in this buried hideaway for three days, equipped with enough supplies and in sufficient comfort. The system, impossible to breach, became the obvious solution when the prince refused an escape tunnel, which he deemed too expensive and too time-consuming.

Still clinging to his plaster savior, Vincent listened carefully. The muffled sounds of pounding feet drifted down from the floor above. The assassins continued down the hallway, without a thought for war or love. He smiled.

He murmured thanks to the goddess and released his hold. Curious to see what would happen next, he walked over to a panel lined with openings. Connected to a network of tubes, they enabled him to hear everything that went on in the residence. The sound of voices slipped from the tube labeled "main hall," to one labeled

“office,” then “master bedroom”: the prince’s men were moving on to the upper floors. They searched every room. Doors were opened unceremoniously, even the closets. Some of the assassins were already back in the garden, no doubt convinced their target had fled.

Savoring the fact that he was still alive, Vincent slipped delightedly into an elegant velvet armchair in the middle of an oriental rug. That night, it was his. That night, he was in complete control. The work he had accomplished with his team had saved his life. He exhaled. His breath and his heartbeat gradually slowed. He thought of his brother, Pierre, and of his friends, the ones who helped him build these unique mechanisms, these little masterpieces of engineering.

Hiding places and secret passages, as varied and imaginative as they were, served to accomplish a single goal: to guarantee the safety of that which mattered most to the client. A person, a treasure, a secret. These illusions—a combination of *trompe-l’œil* and virtuoso mechanisms—existed for that purpose alone.

The intelligence of design and the excellence with which it was implemented were secondary to function. That was a golden rule of his profession—which, strictly speaking, wasn’t one.

Vincent heard raised voices coming from the spy tube in the hall. He recognized the prince’s phrasing. He may not have understood his words, but he sensed his anger. Why was His Highness so angry with his men? Had he really hoped that they would kill him? Didn’t he realize that his troop’s inability to force Vincent from his hiding place was the best guarantee of his own protection?

Vincent didn’t care what the prince thought, as long as he paid up. The work was complete, the mission accomplished. As happened at the end of every project, other much more important questions arose. Fears, above all.

A particularly intense one surfaced: what would happen to his team if he died? Although they only worked together, they were all he had to call family. Vincent felt responsible for them.

The adrenaline dissipated. He was sorry to feel it fade, for when he was running, when he put his remarkable sleight of hand into action, everything moved so fast that suddenly there was no room for existential questions. Urgency smothered all doubts and banished

any concessions. There was no time to drift along in fog and shadow. When the race began, only his deepest self emerged; his most private nature guided each of his actions. He was suddenly untouched by time, escaping for a brief interlude everything he knew and everything he feared.

Vincent felt the weight of the world fade. Just for an instant, like a glimpse of eternity.

The first rays of dawn stained the few clouds in the sky a deep pink, signaling the arrival of a beautiful clear spring morning, the kind that retains a bit of the invigorating chill of a recently departed winter.

The path up to Montmartre had always felt to Vincent like a shortcut to another world, the border between two universes. As he wound his way back to his neighborhood, he left the capital behind. Although Paris had annexed Montmartre almost three decades ago, the area still remained apart; another spirit reigned here.

As a child, Vincent dreamed of one thing: to race down the very same slope and discover the city and the wonders it promised. Wearing an oversized cap that his father had given him, he would spend hours at night on the summit gazing out at the city's multitude of captivating lights. He could follow the lamplighters as they progressed from point to point, street to street, spreading their glow like a swarm of fireflies.

Standing on his hill, overlooking the city and its countless streets, he imagined women in beautiful dresses and well-attired men living lives so different from his own. Unidentified sounds sometimes drifted up to him on the wind, and he amused himself trying to guess what made them.

Oddly, now that he was a grown man, he was never happier than when he was on his way "back up" to his home. A weight lifted when he turned towards his village. The climb was liberating. Up there, he no longer needed to stay in character. He was

no longer obligated to take extra care with his words. There was no need for comparison or self-justification. Up there, he could just be himself.

With measured steps, Vincent finished his climb through what remained of the thickets. He had barely reached the summit when he had to sidestep the workers who milled about on the immense worksite of the future Basilica of Sacré-Cœur. As it had every day for years, an unending procession of carts fed the monstrous structure with blocks of a rare, hard stone that had the distinctive characteristic of turning white in the rain. They were brought from south of Nemours. It was hardly surprising that construction had been hard to finance, despite the successful underwriting. The ogre had not finished expanding its grip, rising little by little, hungry for everything the people's devotion could offer.

Although far from complete, the structure already promised to be imposing. The foundations alone had made all the headlines: the first set was accidentally swallowed up by the left-over galleries of the old gypsum quarries that honeycombed the hill.

The monument was already visible from all over Paris, and many had forgotten about the neighboring Saint-Pierre de Montmartre church, the oldest place of worship in the capital. The venerable church had been abandoned after falling into ruin during the Revolution and subsequent wars. Shameful. The bell no longer tolled. The oldest building in Montmartre—and the most sacred still in existence—had been reduced to silence. The local inhabitants were not pleased that their neighborhood had been muted. They refused to make do with the bells of the churches down below to mark the rhythm of their day.

Vincent wove in and out of the construction site. Early in the morning, an army of carvers was already busy at work on the immaculate stones before they were hoisted by laborers up to masons perched on the enormous scaffolding. Each piece of the puzzle found a place in the walls that grew higher and higher. Colossal wooden supports prevented a clear view of the entire building, even though the entrance with its three Byzantine arches was complete. If it hadn't been dedicated to Christ, the building would have been cursed, given how much its appearance and very

existence were being criticized. No one knew when the baffling nave would cease to rise.

Below, pavers and convicts reshaped the hillside. It was said that a spectacular staircase would soon descend the hill replacing the fields and winding paths.

Once, the only things visible from this precise spot had been the sky and the blades of windmills rotating in the breeze. Where there had once been fourteen, only two remained, one of which survived only after being converted into a rock crusher.

He paused for a moment on the site of the future parvis. He was beginning to feel the effects of his sleepless night in the prince's mansion. Indifferent to the flurry of activity around him, he gazed at the horizon and at the capital spread out below.

Take a step back, see the big picture—he knew how important that was. This very spot was where he had learned the value of rising above it all—in every sense of the term. The city holds a thousand curiosities for those who venture into it. On the bustling streets, everything can delight, entice, and spark longing or desire. But while that may aid the passage of time or serve as a distraction, it rarely helps anyone determine where they really need to go. The uncertain quickly lose their way.

Gustave Eiffel's 984-foot metal tower rose—despite public protestations—above the freshly paved avenues and after a mere two years and two months of construction. Everything was happening so fast these days. Now the tallest structure built by human hands anywhere in the world, its slender red silhouette slashed the horizon and challenged the brilliant azure sky. At night it became a beacon casting its blinding light over the capital. Just weeks before, on March 31, the tower began welcoming visitors from all over the world, but its elevators would only begin running in early May, for the inauguration of the World's Fair that sprawled at its feet.

Paris was changing. Everything taking place pointed to a new world. The future basilica had already claimed its place in this emerging world of inventions and progress that was upsetting the course of things in many ways.

Most of Vincent's beloved landmarks had disappeared, one after another. But the corner of Rue des Saules and Rue Saint-Vincent was

still home to the Lapin Agile, a cabaret where laughter and singing drifted out onto the street at all hours of the day and night. Back when it was still called the Rendez-vous des Voleurs, his father would go there almost every evening to banter and to secure work for the following day. Despite Vincent's attachment to the emblems of his childhood, he would have preferred to see this particular establishment obliterated without a trace.

He was startled by an order shouted at a laborer dallying nearby: "Get back to work!"

This roused Vincent from his daydream; his conscience might very well have bellowed the same thing. He was expected somewhere.

As day dawned, the neighborhoods sprung to life. The rag-and-bone men were already going about their business, cursing the Poubelle bins that were stealing their livelihood. The street sweepers finished clearing debris, and stalls were set up. Water carriers, knife grinders, glaziers, caners, and other craftsmen began their rounds, offering their services at the top of their lungs.

Vincent headed for Montmartre's north slope, sheltered from the tumult of the capital. As he descended Rue de l'Abreuvoir, the din of construction gave way to birdsong.

He walked down the middle of the cobblestone path unconcerned about traffic; carriages never came this way, for the slope was too steep, and those who lived here couldn't afford to have anything delivered anyway. A few months earlier an automobile had tried, on a dare, but it stopped a quarter of the way up Rue Mont-Cenis. None of the residents had ever seen such a machine, and the ungodly noise of the combustion engine had terrified several of the locals.

Without slowing, Vincent had already entered another world. In the shadow of the ruins of the Château des Brouillards, coal men and scrap-metal merchants crowded together in a tangle of shanties and hovels belching smoke. This anarchical maze overrun with vegetation was known as "the maquis." No one ventured in unless they lived here, and it was a refuge for many outcasts. It wasn't a place for wandering; here people just did their best to scrape by, hoping for brighter days. There were no roads lined with wide sidewalks, no lights illuminating the twilight, and no water flowing in the

houses; here the paths became torrents of mud after each rainstorm. Penniless artists flocked here in ever greater numbers, conversing and debating in the midst of the less fortunate. They had a wealth of dreams and found sustenance in their ambitions, although none of that was worth a decent hot meal.

The cries of children mingled with the scents of reheated soup and laundry. Even after washing, the linens hung out to dry were far from pristine. Sometimes a street singer could be heard warming up and practicing popular songs from inside his shanty before heading out to perform on more respectable thoroughfares. People with twisted—or broken—fates lived together, united for better or for worse by a life that spared no one. Even so, Vincent felt more at ease here than in Paris's smarter neighborhoods.

He became more alert as soon as he entered the maquis. He checked periodically to be sure he hadn't been followed. His hide-out wasn't far, and he was keen to keep its location as secret as the passages he designed.

Skirting a fence covered in posters that touted the area's new dance halls, Vincent suddenly slipped between two boards, supple as a cat. He crossed an abandoned grain and flour depot to enter, unnoticed, the backdoor of a house on Rue Caulaincourt. Although he was the official tenant, he never used the front door. The deserted business located just behind the residence provided a much safer means of access, hidden from curious eyes. By cutting through the former repository, now reduced to a few empty storage spaces covered with a thin layer of dusty old flour, he came out into a small wild garden at the foot of the service door to his own house. It took more than a key to open it: he had been careful to protect the entrance with an array of traps and alarms.

After wiping his fingers clean to avoid leaving any trace, he turned one of the iron moldings on the doorframe, which disarmed the load that was trained to fire on unwelcome visitors, and simultaneously rang the bell that alerted his friends of his approach. Then he entered the large empty house.

What had once been a guesthouse was dark and dirty, nothing like the lavish places where Vincent most often operated. But that didn't matter; aside from sleeping in one of the upstairs

bedrooms—constantly changing place as a precaution—he and his companions passed the majority of their time elsewhere. The heart of their hideout was located below.

Vincent approached the fireplace in the abandoned kitchen. He slipped his hand into a hole on the side left by a missing brick. With his fingertips, he pushed the trigger that activated the opening mechanism. With a click, the back wall of the hearth shifted to reveal a small stairway that led beneath the building.

When Vincent and his younger brother, Pierre, had looked for a larger location to develop their unique business, they hadn't been attracted so much by the size of the house as by the large vaulted cellars, the remains of a monastic annex belonging to the royal abbey; only the section above ground had been altered. They decided to set up their workshop here, shortly before Konrad, the German carpenter, and Eustasio, the Italian artist, joined them, completing the team. Their craft required no storefront—quite the contrary.

Vincent raced down the steps.

The secret entrance locked shut behind Vincent. He felt reassured as he inhaled the familiar musk of the cellar and felt the solidity of the steps and the massive walls of the ancient stairwell. The warm light of oil lamps greeted him at the bottom, setting him immediately at ease. He had returned home, to safety.

Since the day he and his younger brother had been driven from their childhood home, he had never felt safe or in his rightful place anywhere but in this underground space. It had once served as a wine cellar for the Benedictine nuns of the Montmartre abbey, back when vineyards covered acres of what at the time was still countryside. Now all that remained was an immense vaulted chamber supported by columns. Barrels and casks had given way to the tools of other trades. The space now accommodated the team's various activities: an abundance of gear and equipment piled between the work stations gave an impression of general disorder. The sheer quantity of tools and materials needed to carry out their projects generated a bizarre accumulation that could rival the set department of an opera house.

On the left, Konrad's carpentry and cabinetry workshop housed a lathe and a bandsaw; the scent of turpentine often dominated the mingled fragrances of the wood varieties he employed. Above the vise hung an assortment of chisels, planes, files, gouges, and cans of wax and wood stain.

Across the room, Eustasio had strewn out pots of paint, pigments, brushes, and cloths that he used to create his remarkable optical

illusions. He mastered all manner of camouflage and subterfuge: in his hands, steel could be mistaken for a cloud, and cloth for granite. He could make something new look old, or something hollow appear solid. Equally skilled with plaster, fabric, leather, and glass, he was also tasked with creating scale models of future projects—they never failed to persuade clients.

In the center of the space, between the various trial maquettes used to test Vincent's inventions, stood a long table piled with blueprints and sketches in a deceptively untidy jumble.

The basement workshop was completed by a forge equipped with a smoke evacuation system and a large counter for metal work. That was Pierre's domain; like his older brother, he specialized in mechanisms of every kind.

He was waiting for Vincent, leaning against a pillar where he had been standing since hearing the alarm bell ring.

"Took you a while," he called out in greeting.

"Long enough to perform for the prince and come back."

"Everything went okay?"

"I wouldn't be here if it hadn't. I risked my neck, but everything turned out all right in the end. He yelped out in terror at the sound of my voice coming through the spy tube in the hall."

Vincent's younger brother frowned. "You shouldn't take it so lightly. I worry every time. Not all of our clients are honest. I don't like you going by yourself, it's dangerous."

"Everything is dangerous in our business, little brother. So what good would it do to put you at risk as well?"

"Still, waiting for you is torture. It's actually getting worse. With every hour that passes, I worry I won't ever see you again."

Vincent placed his hand on his brother's shoulder. "I know how it feels. But don't worry, I always come back."

A tall man with a thick beard appeared from behind a pillar to join them.

"Greetings, Vincent."

"Well, hello there, Konrad."

"What kind of welcome did the prince have in store for you?" Konrad's German accent was strong, but his speech was impeccable.

“He forced me to run very fast and he tried to have my throat slit. Otherwise it was rather gentlemanly. The usual. If Aphrodite had refused to drop, I would be dead and good riddance!”

The two men laughed.

“His Highness is very happy with his hideout,” added Vincent. “He sends his congratulations.”

Pierre shrugged his shoulders. “Your prince doesn’t even know who we are.”

“That’s one of the company rules. It’s for your own protection.”

“Did he pay us?” fretted Konrad.

“The gold was delivered on schedule. Henri confirmed as much.”

The German clapped his hands with delight. “Then project forty-eight is officially complete, and we are a little richer!”

Vincent looked around their hideout and said, surprised, “Where is Eustasio?”

“He’s in Passy, with the Comtesse de Vignole,” explained Pierre. “Project forty-two. The hidden door to her secret boudoir needed another touch up.”

Vincent burst out laughing. “This is at least the fifth time the door to her boudoir has needed a paint job!”

“Every week,” said Pierre with a knowing smile.

“Let’s hope she doesn’t send our handsome Italian home too exhausted. Did he take his tools with him for show? Or just his strapping good looks?”

Konrad pointed to the toolbox at the foot of Eustasio’s workbench. The three men chuckled at their friend.

Pierre was the first to grow serious and change the subject. “I hope you didn’t forget about the meeting with Alfred Minguier later this afternoon.”

“The industrialist? What exactly does he want?”

“He didn’t say. He wants to explain in person.”

“Who recommended us?”

“Françoise de Fremensac. Her daughter is engaged to Mr. Minguier’s only son and heir to his fortune.”

“Nobility bows to industry. That’s a sign of the times. Power is changing hands.”

“The powerful used to wave a sacred sword, now it’s a donkey wrench!” quipped Konrad.

“It’s ‘monkey,’ Konrad, a monkey wrench. But you’re right.”

A brief scraping sound from the back of the workshop caught Vincent’s attention.

“Did you hear that?”

Pierre and Konrad shook their heads in perfect unison. Vincent squinted to get a better view of where the sound seemed to emanate. But there was no light in that part of the cellar where the men tossed unused scrap materials.

“It’s probably a rat,” said Vincent’s brother in what he hoped was a reassuring voice.

Vincent raised his eyebrows. “A rat?”

“I’ll take care of it while you’re at Minguier’s.”

Something about Pierre’s behavior was off, piquing Vincent’s attention. He was too quick to respond, and his tone of voice too unsteady for such a simple matter. Vincent peered again into the far corner.

“A rat?” he repeated, increasingly intrigued by his younger brother’s strange manner.

He turned to Konrad, but the carpenter raised his hands, feigning incomprehension. For the first time, Vincent had the feeling that his colleague, reputed for his candor, was uncomfortable. Determined to find out what was going on, he grabbed a lantern and headed to the back of the chamber.

He walked straight towards the dark area where no one ever went.

This time, Pierre caught up with him, ran ahead, and tried to block his path. He raised his voice: “Why don’t you ever listen? You only do as you please!”

His brother did not slow down.

“Even mother complained about it! No wonder she didn’t last long!”

Vincent froze. Suppressing a flash of pain and anger, he turned to face his brother who had never spoken to him that way before. “Why did you say that, Pierre? What are you accusing me of?”

The young man knew he had gone too far.

“I’m not accusing you of anything,” he said, trying to smooth things over. “I’m just saying... you should let me try to get rid of the rats. You have more important things to do.”

In the lamp light, Vincent could see that Pierre had gone pale and avoided his gaze. He was now convinced there was more than a rodent to be found in the cluttered mess. He stepped forward and began his inspection. He shone his light onto the heaps of boards, piles of unused scenery, various scraps, and stacks of models, project after project. His brother tried to resume the conversation.

“Come on, let’s head back to the table. We’re arguing over nothing.”

“Be quiet,” ordered his older brother.

Vincent listened hard in the silence. Finally, he detected the sound of breathing—quiet, but fast—that confirmed his suspicions. He took a wary step forward. With a fluid motion, he pulled an ebony-handled folding knife from his belt where it always hung and opened the blade.

“Please,” begged Pierre. “Don’t go any further . . .”

Vincent wasn’t listening. He had just caught sight of a glistening eye between two wooden friezes. It stared at him unblinking. Whether it was predator or prey was impossible to say. Warily, his knife raised, Vincent called out in a calm voice, “Whoever you are, come out immediately.”

“You’re going to hurt me!” said a fearful voice. A woman’s voice.

Vincent insisted, “I’ll only hurt you if you don’t come out.”

Nothing happened at first, but the boards eventually began to move and shift apart. In the hiding place under the scrap pile, Vincent discovered a young woman crouched in a torn bodice, with disheveled hair and filthy skin but an incredibly beautiful face.

Furious, Vincent grabbed his brother by the jacket and shoved him against the wall.

“Do you realize the danger you’ve put us in by bringing that girl here? What were you thinking?”

Pierre was terrified. It wasn’t the first time he’d seen his older brother lose his temper, and he knew what he was capable of. But until now, Vincent’s anger had never been directed at him.

“You reckless idiot! Have you lost your mind? She saw our faces. She knows where we live. She knows about our inventions! She could give away our secrets to anyone!”

“I didn’t let her in,” said Pierre defensively.

“Excuse me? You mean to tell me she got in by herself? She dodged all of our traps?”

“Last week she fell in through the delivery hatch. I swear I’m telling the truth.”

“The delivery hatch? The one we sealed closed together?”

“Go see for yourself. Everything we put in rotted through. I was at my workbench when I heard a cry. I rushed over and found her on the ground, half unconscious. She was being chased down the street by a group of thugs and ducked into the first spot she could find. They wanted to sell her to the brothel on Rue Letort.”

Unsettled by what he had heard, Vincent loosened his grip slightly, torn by conflicting feelings.

His brother continued. “I considered sending her back out the way she came, I really did, but I couldn’t find the heart to do it.

Throwing her back out there would have been the end of her.”

Vincent listened. With slightly more calm he asked, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was waiting for the right moment, between two emergencies. In the meantime, I took it upon myself to hide her. I told her to stay away from the table and the blueprints.”

“How long has she been here?”

“Three days.”

Vincent’s anger flared again. “She’s heard everything we’ve said for the last three days? And you have the gall to tell me that you’re worried because I don’t get home fast enough?”

“She doesn’t know what we’re talking about.”

Vincent spun around, looking for the carpenter, who had slipped away.

“Konrad!”

“Over here!”

“Did you know about this?” Vincent curtly asked the approaching German.

“I heard her cry out when she fell . . .”

“So you knew. And it didn’t occur to you to inform me, knowing how hard I work to keep us safe?”

“I respect you, Vincent, you’re an honest man. We get along well and I would never betray you, but I couldn’t denounce your own brother. You’re close, inseparable even. It’s not my place to tell you what your brother won’t. That’s your business. However, please, I would like you to let go of him; it pains me to see you fight like this.”

Vincent took a deep breath and complied.

Konrad went on, “I must admit, I would have done the same thing if I were him. And I bet you would have too.”

Vincent straightened his jacket. “First I would have asked myself if she was a spy!”

“Sent by whom, *mein Freund*? If you had seen her eating, shaking, and crying in Pierre’s arms, you would have known she was just a lost, starving young woman.”

Vincent looked directly at Pierre, who no longer averted his gaze.

“Now that you’ve decided to save her, what do you intend to do with her?”

“We could let her stay here for a while.”

“A girl, here? When we don’t know anything about her?”

“I trust her more than many of our clients,” retorted Pierre.

“You know, Vincent, we can adapt,” said Konrad reassuringly. “It would only be for a little while. Plus, she knows how to cook, and well.”

Vincent gasped.

“She cooked for you?”

“She made last night’s stew.”

Vincent didn’t know what to say. True, the stew had been excellent, but that’s not what was on his mind. He looked towards the back of the room. She watched them, a frail silhouette barely visible against the darkness.

The young woman stood waiting for them to decide her fate. Her scrawny arms dangled by her sides, but she held herself upright. Her shoulders drooped, but she stood firm, her chin raised, attentive. Even when a person has been stripped of everything, their true nature remains.

Vincent wanted to remain impassive; his responsibilities demanded it. Forever condemned to make the right decision, he had to resist all sentiment to carry out his duties. Pity was not an option, and anyway, she would probably refuse it. He already had enough to manage without adding a young woman who had stumbled onto them by accident. If only she had holed up in some other corner, anywhere but here. But fate had decided otherwise, and Vincent could no longer pretend that nothing had happened, especially since he knew exactly what she was going through. He felt it. He remembered. He had been in the same situation, that hellish moment when one’s fate lies in someone else’s hands. Truly nothing would be simple in this life, thought Vincent.

He turned to the woman. “What’s your name?”

“Gabrielle.”

“Who shall I say is calling?”

“Tell Mr. Minguier that Vincent has arrived. He’ll understand.”

The butler frowned doubtfully. “Please wait here.” He pronounced the request with effort. The manservant turned on his heels, discreetly motioning to a maid to remain near the entrance. He wasn’t about to let someone who presented himself by first name only out of sight. These days, delinquents would try anything.

Vincent studied his new environment, as he always did. He had had occasion to notice that a housekeeper at the entrance to a mansion indicates great wealth; a butler at the door suggests even more.

Vincent scrutinized the entrance hall, which conveyed the image of power its owner sought to project. First to catch his eye was an enormous chandelier made entirely of steel chains. Elsewhere their girth would have served to hoist heavy loads or secure a boat, but here they were mere decoration. And yet the chandelier’s imposing size created a curious impression of balance, and the disparity between its classical form and the material was enchanting. Where others displayed crystal, the industry baron had decided to showcase what he manufactured.

The walls were hung with dramatic paintings of battles, including one lost by the French—which supporters of the Republic might find to be in poor taste. Between two paintings hung the blazon of a noble line the industrialist did not belong to, and below that, more surprisingly, two large photographs of factories. Vincent stepped closer. On the front window, he could make out the words

“Minguier & Bellair, manufacturers of the best welded link chains.” Vincent had seen very few photographs in his life, and never any this large; it was rare to see them displayed like this. He was still studying the images when the butler reappeared, visibly unnerved.

“Please follow me. Mr. Minguier will see you now.” He seemed surprised to be pronouncing the invitation. Out of habit, he motioned the maid to gather the visitor’s things, but checked himself. No coat, no hat: there was definitely something odd about the fellow.

A short man with a round, red face appeared in the hallway and walked towards them with his hand outstretched. “Mr. Vincent! I’m so delighted to meet you at last.”

“My respects to you, Mr. Minguier.”

The handshake might have felt sincere if it hadn’t been so overly emphatic. It revealed more about the man’s technique than his character—a real businessman’s handshake.

The industrialist teased him good-naturedly. “It’s more difficult to get a meeting with you than with the commissioner of the World’s Fair!”

“I beg your pardon.”

Vincent’s formality and restraint contrasted with the man’s gregarious spontaneity; he invited Vincent into his office. “Please, come in.”

He pointed to an armchair and turned to his manservant. “Joseph, see that I am not disturbed. And try not to eavesdrop for once.”

Joseph was outraged, but his master couldn’t have cared less. The butler disappeared. As soon as the door closed, the two men settled in across the desk from each other.

“Cigar?” offered Minguier.

“No, thank you. I don’t smoke.”

“Neither do I, except when other people do. Cigars are all the rage in manufacturing—the bosses seem to want to produce as much smoke as their factories!” He laughed at his own joke.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Minguier?”

“You’re quite right, let’s get down to business.” The man straightened in his seat, then leaned towards his visitor. He lowered his voice and said gravely, “Let’s be clear: everything we talk about here is absolutely confidential.”

“Of course. You have my word. And it will stay that way, should we work together or not.”

Alfred Minguier nodded his head appreciatively and began. "I'm preoccupied with one affair in particular, and when I learned of your existence, I immediately pegged you as the man for the job. Let me explain: I inherited an old house that holds a great deal of sentimental value for me. Several months ago, by sheer accident, I discovered that it contains a secret passage. But I was given no information about how to open it. So here I am, knowing that it exists, but completely unable to access it. You see the problem."

"Is the mechanism blocked? Would you like to have it changed?"

"Before we resort to that, I'd like you to try to make it work."

"You know nothing about how it operates?"

"Absolutely nothing."

"Do you have any idea what purpose it serves?"

"Given the building's history, I imagine the passage leads to a secret hideout, but I'm not even certain about that."

"When was the passage last used?"

"No idea. Given the condition of the furniture near the entrance, it's probably been closed for over a century."

"A century! Good gracious! What made you suspect the existence of a hidden room?"

The question seemed to surprise Minguier. He hesitated before answering.

"I found allusions to it in correspondence between the former owners."

Vincent noticed the man carefully weigh each word of his brief response. So it was a sensitive topic. "Did they mention anything about how to enter the room?"

"Not a word. I find myself—literally—faced with a wall I can't get past."

"Have you tried to force it open? After all, it's your house, and you must have the mechanical means at your disposal in your factories."

Minguier shook his head.

"I fear the entrance may be booby-trapped. If we resort to violence, the contents might be destroyed by who knows what kind of curse—fire, flood, or collapse, I really can't say. I can't take that risk."

"I understand. You would like me to bypass the locking systems and regain access to the room."

“Exactly.”

“If I may, do you have any idea about what you will find behind the door, Mr. Minguier?”

The man was taken aback.

“Am I obliged to answer?”

“Certainly not, but I think it would be preferable. There is often a connection between the value of the contents and the complexity of the methods used to protect it. Being able to evaluate this factor with a maximum of information will help me to advise you and prepare my research without incurring unnecessary costs. Rest assured, I know how to keep a secret.”

The industrialist was clearly displeased at the idea of revealing the hideout’s contents.

“I’m not sure what I’m going to find,” he said reluctantly. “Let’s just say that it could be vital for me. I will tell you what I know when the time comes. First I want to know if this mission falls within your expertise. That’s the first step.”

“I’ve devoted myself to studying secret passages and their mechanisms since I was in my teens. I’ve analyzed masterpieces by the craft’s best minds, and I work hard to carry on their talent. Normally I’m hired to build mysteries, not to uncover those created by others. I must admit, I’ve never been presented with a challenge like this, but I’m keen to try. I can hardly sing my own praises, but at least I’m certain no one else has as deep an interest in the subject as I do.”

“So my sources tell me, and full of praise. I understand you work with a team.”

“Indeed.”

“Are they trustworthy?”

“I answer for my men as well as myself. But they specialize in construction.”

“Then you won’t need them.”

“In theory, no.”

“Perfect.”

“If you are interested in my services, I will need to visit the site with you to begin my investigation—and to determine the fee for the operation.”

“Money won’t be a problem. Once the passage is open, you’ll be paid whatever you like.”

“Pardon me for broaching the subject, but we’re accustomed to receiving payment in gold, if you don’t mind. No paper notes, no shares.”

Minguier waved his hand.

“Satisfy my request, and you’ll have all the gold you want.”

Vincent was surprised by this reaction. Businessmen are not in the habit of handing out their profits with such generosity, unless doing so could generate even more. He had noticed the contrast in the quiet way Alfred Minguier expressed himself and the intensity of his sharp gaze, which missed nothing. He considered the discrepancy between the man’s enthusiastic cordiality and his reluctance to respond to perfectly reasonable questions: he had a gray area; there was something ambiguous about him.

“When would you like us to go there, Mr. Minguier?”

“We can only do it at night. I’m too busy during the day. My presence is required in the Galerie des Machines to prepare for the imminent opening of the World’s Fair. My associate and I will be presenting a new machine capable of producing ten yards of chain an hour.”

Instinctively, Vincent knew that this reason, though entirely valid, was not, in fact, the truth.

Laughter thundered and insults flew in the din at the Brasserie des Martyrs. The place had quite a reputation around Pigalle. Foremen from the many surrounding construction sites gathered there at the end of the work day, before the artists and poets who arrived and lingered much later than the laborers, who had to be up at dawn.

The pediment of the narrow hallway leading to the bathroom was inscribed with a maxim: “The worker washes his hands before pissing, the intellectual washes them after.”

The large first-floor dining room was occupied by those there to be seen, while conversation flowed easily on the more informal second floor.

In a back corner, glasses were filled to celebrate the completion of project forty-eight. Vincent raised his.

“Let’s make a toast, my friends. To all of you! Let us never forget: nothing would be possible without each other.”

The whole team had gathered. Even young Henri was there, although, unlike the others, he neither developed nor created passages. His role was to manage food supplies—including fetching water from the well in the courtyard—and, most importantly, acting as messenger. He collected letters but also delivered them, which he did with unrivaled speed thanks to his talent for latching undetected onto horse-drawn carriages and other vehicles. In this way, he could cross Paris in less than an hour with the involuntary assistance of successive coach drivers, who always grumbled when they spotted him. Henri—nicknamed the Nail for his leanness—also carried out

other, more confidential tasks for Vincent. When their companions asked for specifics, the boy replied that he ran security, and Vincent eluded the question with a wisecrack.

That evening Henri discovered that, for the first time, his fingers were finally long enough to completely encircle his glass of wine when he held it in one hand. He could now cup it in his palm, his thumb and index finger touching. He wasn't going to say anything for fear that his older companions would tease him yet again and call him, as they often did, "kid." He had been waiting for this moment for years, as project after project came to an end. He had been drinking wine like a man for three years, and from now on he could hold his glass like an adult. He kept his pride to himself, happy that someone else, for the moment, was on the receiving end of the teasing. The Italian was the target this time.

"So, Eustasio, tell us about this 'touch-up' at the countess's house."

"And don't forget the technical details!" ribbed Konrad.

"Knock it off, the countess is a respectable *signora*..."

"And to stay that way, she receives her lovers in her secret *boudoir*!" teased Pierre.

The table burst into laughter, Eustasio included.

"It's true, she is passionate," he confided. "She says I have an ardor that aristocrats are incapable of. She thinks they're boring and keeps saying they're only interested in themselves. So it's only inevitable..."

"... the countess is consorting with a commoner!" said Vincent. "I hope she's generous with you."

"She doesn't pay me or give me anything! I'm not that kind of man," Eustasio countered. "She's gentle, and it's true, we have a good time together. You can laugh all you want, but in the wee hours of the morning, we forget about everything that separates us and just enjoy what we share. I'm not ashamed."

"I'm sorry, Eustasio, I didn't mean to offend you. What matters is that you're happy with the relationship—or rather, with the repairs!"

The five companions burst out laughing again. Konrad took a swig of coarse wine and changed the subject.

"With the payment from the last project, our little treasure has grown substantially. I don't know about you, but I find myself wondering more and more often what I'm going to do with my gold."

Pierre motioned for him to lower his voice.

“Soon, we’ll be living like princes, isn’t that right?” continued Konrad more quietly. “Don’t you ever think about it?”

He turned to his Italian friend.

“Eustasio, are you planning to stay in Paris or go back to Italy?”

“Who knows where my destiny lies? I’d like to bring my parents here. My mother is French, after all. Maybe buy them an acre of land and a little house.”

With a faraway look in his eyes, he added, “And why not buy a studio for painting or sculpture?”

“Specializing in nudes!” quipped Konrad. “You already have a model!”

“What about you?” chuckled the artist. “Will you go home?”

“Home . . . I don’t really know where home is. I have no ties, no family to help or to find. I would like to travel a little, and lend my furniture-making services to churches or cathedrals in Europe. I learned to speak several languages during my time on the road, and clergy are often in need of good craftsmen. They pay well. I also thought about investing in an apartment, or in those new shares that the rich are snatching up, in a far-off mine that promises incredible profits.”

Each man weighed in, saying how audacious the idea was; just look at the run of bad luck that had befallen the underwriters who invested their savings in the Panama Canal. Investing money in a business managed by an obscure board of directors? Vincent didn’t set much store by it and Eustasio didn’t understand it.

Pierre said he had other plans. As the others turned to look at him, he calmly explained his idea, which suggested he had probably thought more seriously than any of them about his future.

“There’s no way I’m leaving Paris. I’d like to stay in Montmartre and rent lodgings with a view, despite Sacré-Cœur. As far as my work is concerned, Mr. Eiffel and his metal tower have demonstrated what steel makes possible. Even though the attraction will be taken down when the World’s Fair is over, it has ushered in the real steel age. I bet that metal will define the next century, and I’m certain there will be plenty of exciting opportunities for a guy like me.”

Henri piped up, “I’d like to become a doctor.”

The boy ignored his companions' mockery. "For sure I could! With my share of the gold, I'll be able to pay for medical school. I can do it. I learned to read in less than a year!"

Vincent was the only one who didn't tease him.

"You're right, Henri. Don't be discouraged by what others say. Ever. If you're determined and if you work hard, it's possible. Read, learn, study. Don't forget arithmetic. In a few years, these unbelievers will be more than happy to have you minister to their sorry bones!"

"True enough!" exclaimed Konrad. "Hurry up and become a doctor, because my vision is going and I'm short-winded."

Pierre winked. "Eustasio's conquests will eventually earn him a shameful disease!"

The Italian laughed cheerfully, but once the hooting had settled, he turned to Vincent.

"And what do you plan to do with your little fortune?"

Vincent paused a moment before answering, then looked at each of them in turn.

"What matters most to me is not what I do with it, but with whom I do it. Our business is exhausting and dangerous. Our clients are complicated and sometimes perverse. Each project is a puzzle, a tightrope act without a safety harness, but I enjoy what we do. I especially love doing it with you. It's funny, but even though I'm in charge of our team, you will ultimately decide what happens to me."

"I want to stay with you!" Henri gushed.

With these words, the boy suddenly seemed younger than he usually tried to appear.

The five friends spent a while considering how their money might be used. Eustasio even compared their ramblings to the adventures of Perrette and her pot of milk in Jean de La Fontaine's fable. Like the milkmaid, they imagined so many possibilities—some quite ridiculous—of what they might get for their treasure.

Although no one could hear their words over the noise of the dining room, one man was watching them intently. Peering out from under the visor of his cap, he observed them with an unbroken gaze, all the while playing with a leather shoelace that he wrapped with mechanical dexterity around his long, thin fingers. He had gotten lucky that night. All he needed to do was follow one of them to

identify the whole group. He hadn't expected it to be so easy. He now knew the faces of those who so carefully protected the secrets of the powerful.

The rest would be neither long nor complicated.