

The
PARIS
SEAMSTRESS

ALSO BY NATASHA LESTER

A Kiss from Mr Fitzgerald
Her Mother's Secret

The
PARIS
SEAMSTRESS

NATASHA
LESTER

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For Ruby.

*I promised that you could start reading my books when you were twelve.
It seemed so far away at the time. But now you are twelve and you are
my kindred spirit. I hope you continue to love books and history forever.
Happy reading, my gorgeous girl.*

PART ONE
Estella

Chapter One

2 JUNE 1940

Estella Bisette unrolled a bolt of gold silk, watching it kick up its heels and cancan across the worktable. She ran her hand over it, feeling both softness and sensuality, like rose petals and naked skin. 'What's your story morning glory,' she murmured in English.

She heard her mother laugh. 'Estella, you sound more American than the Americans do.'

Estella smiled. Her English-language tutor had said the same thing to her when he ended her lessons the year before and joined the exodus out of Europe; that she had a better American accent than he did. She tucked the roll under one arm and draped the silk across her shoulder. Then she swung into a tango, heedless of the women's cries of, '*Attention!*', cries which only goaded her to add a song to her dance: Josephine Baker's fast and frothy 'I Love Dancing' bubbling from her mouth between gasps of laughter.

She dipped backwards, before soaring upright too fast. The roll of silk skimmed over the midinette's worktable, just missing Nannette's head but slapping Marie on the shoulder.

'Estella! *Mon Dieu*,' Marie scolded, holding her shoulder with overplayed anguish.

Estella kissed Marie's cheek. 'But it deserves a tango at the very least.' She gestured to the material, glowing like a summer moon amidst the quotidian surroundings of the atelier, surely destined for a dress that wouldn't just turn heads; it would spin them faster than Cole Porter's fingers on the piano at the infamous Bricktop's jazz club in Montmartre.

'It deserves for you to sit down with it and start work,' Marie grumbled.

Monsieur Aumont appeared in the doorway, drawn by the noise. He took one look at Estella draped in silk, smiled and said, 'What is *ma petite étoile* up to now?'

'Injuring me,' Marie complained.

'It's lucky you have enough flesh to withstand Estella's antics,' Monsieur Aumont said teasingly and Marie muttered something under her breath.

'What are we making with it?' Estella asked, lovingly stroking the folds of gold.

'This,' Monsieur Aumont replied, handing over the sketch with a flourish.

It was a Lanvin, a reworking of the 1920s La Cavallini dress, but instead of an oversized bow adorned with thousands of pearls and crystals, the bow was decorated with hundreds of petite gold satin rosebuds.

'Oh!' she breathed, reaching out to touch the sketch. She knew the delicate rows of flowers would look like a brilliant swirl of gold from afar and that their true composition – an undulating ribbon of roses – would only become apparent if one was close enough to the wearer to see it properly. There wasn't a military epaulette in sight, nor a gas mask case slung across the shoulder, nor was the dress coloured one of the many variations of blue – Maginot blue, Royal Air Force blue, tempered steel blue – which Estella had grown to loathe. 'If one day my sketches look like this,' she said, admiring Lanvin's exquisite illustration, 'I'll be so happy I'll never need a lover.'

'Estella!' Marie reprimanded, as if no 22-year-old should even know the meaning of the word, let alone speak it aloud.

Estella looked across at Jeanne, her mother, and grinned.

True to form, her mother continued to make tiny pink cherry blossoms from silk and didn't look up or intervene but Estella could see that she was pressing her lips together to stop a smile, knowing her daughter loved nothing more than to shock poor Marie.

'A dress is no match for a lover,' Monsieur Aumont admonished. He indicated the silk. 'You have two weeks to turn this into a golden bouquet.'

'Will there be a remnant?' Estella asked, still holding the bolt of fabric tightly to her.

'They've sent forty metres but I've calculated that you only need thirty-six – if you're careful.'

'I'll be as careful as a dream weaver making Leavers lace,' Estella said reverently.

She took the silk away to be stretched over a wooden frame, held in place by rows of nails. A solution of sugar and water was applied to stiffen the fabric enough so that Marie could stamp circles out of it with the heavy iron cutters.

Once Marie had finished, Estella covered a foam block with a piece of clean white fabric, heated her shaping ball over a low flame, tested the temperature in a pot of wax, set the first round gold disc of silk onto the white fabric, then pressed the shaping ball into the silk. It curled up instantly around the heated ball to form one lovely rosebud. She laid the rosebud to one side then repeated the process, making two hundred flowers by lunchtime.

While she worked, she chatted and laughed with Nannette, Marie and her mother, as they did every day, until Nannette said quietly, 'I've heard there are more French soldiers fleeing from the north now than Belgian or Dutch civilians.'

'If the soldiers are fleeing, what stands between us and the Germans?' Estella said. 'Are we supposed to hold Paris with our sewing needles?'

‘The will of the French people stands before the Boche. France will not fall,’ her mother insisted and Estella sighed.

It was pointless to have the argument. Much as she wished to keep her mother safe, Estella knew that she and her mother weren’t going anywhere. They would continue to sit in the atelier and make flowers from fabric as if nothing mattered more than fashion because they had nowhere else to go. They wouldn’t be joining the refugees streaming down from the Netherlands, Belgium, and the north of France to the south because they had no family in the country to whom they could run.

In Paris they had a home and work. Out there, nothing. So, even though her mother’s blind faith in France’s ability to withstand the German army worried Estella, she had no reply. And was it so wrong that, inside the walls of the atelier, they could all pretend, for perhaps only a few more days, that if couturiers like Lanvin still wanted gold silk flowers made, then everything would be all right.

During their lunch hour, as they ate bowls of rabbit stew in the atelier’s kitchen, Estella sat apart from the other women and drew. In pencil on paper she sketched out the lines of a long, slim skirt that fell to the floor, a dress with sleeves capped at the shoulder, a waistline with a thin sash of gold silk, a neckline cut into an elegant V and ornamented with lapels like those on a man’s shirt – a touch nobody would expect on a floor-length gown but one that Estella knew made it both modish and matchless. Despite the skirt’s close fit, it could still be danced in: it was bold and gold, a dress to live life in. And in Paris in June 1940, anything that promised life was welcome.

Her mother finished her stew and, even though there was still fifteen minutes remaining of their lunch hour, she threaded her way through the atelier to Monsieur Aumont’s office. Estella watched their faces as they spoke quietly to one another. Monsieur, one of the *gueules cassées* of the Great War – men who’d had part of their faces destroyed, as he had, by flamethrowers, leaving him with distorted lips, barely a nose, a monstrous face that Estella no longer

noticed and which he covered with a copper mask outside the atelier – was unabashedly vocal in his opposition to the Germans, or the Boche, as he and her mother preferred to call them. Estella had lately seen men coming and going from the atelier after they'd met with Monsieur on the stairs, men who were ostensibly delivering fabric or dye but whose boxes only the Monsieur ever unpacked.

And her mother – one of the 700 000 women left a widow by the Great War, her soldier husband dying not long after they were married, when Jeanne was only fifteen. Two people who had reason to hate the Germans and who seemed to speak too often in whispers, whispers that looked too serious to be of the romantic sort.

Estella bent her head back over her sketch when her mother returned.

'Très, très belle,' Jeanne said of her daughter's illustration.

'I'm going to make it from the remnant tonight.'

'And then wear it to La Belle Chance?' her mother asked, referring to the jazz club in Montmartre that Estella frequented still, despite the fact that since the French army had been mobilised last year and the British had fled at Dunkirk in May, there were few men to be found in the city; only those whose jobs in munitions factories exempted them from service.

'Oui.' Estella smiled at her mother.

'I will be at the Gare du Nord.'

'You'll be tired tomorrow.'

'Just as you were this morning,' her mother chided.

Last night it had been Estella who'd stood at the train station. She'd been the one handing out bowls of soup to the refugees streaming through Paris, some of whom had been lucky enough to arrive by train, many of whom had walked hundreds of miles to escape the Germans. Once fed, the refugees took up their trail again until they found a home with relatives, or else they continued on as far as their legs could carry them, as far as they could get from the war, across the Loire River where it was said they would be safe.

The day drifted by, rosebud after rosebud. At six o' clock, Estella and her mother joined arms and left, walking along Rue des Petits Champs behind the Palais Royal, past the Place des Victoires and Les Halles, horse-drawn wagons for transporting food standing in a line out the front now, not vans. As they walked, the realities that Estella had been trying to ignore beneath a roll of spectacular gold silk asserted themselves.

First was the eerie quiet; it wasn't silent but at this time of night they should be surrounded by seamstresses and tailors and cutters and models all finished for the day and making their way home. But there were few people walking past the empty ateliers and empty shops; so much emptiness where, once upon a time, even a month ago, Paris had been full of life. But when the *drôle de guerre* – the phoney war – ended on May the tenth as Hitler's army pushed into France, the rush of people out of Paris had begun. First the Americans in cars driven by chauffeurs, then the families with older cars, then those who'd been able to find a horse and cart.

But the June night was warm and soft and scented with lilac, the horse chestnut trees wore strands of pearl-like flowers and here and there a restaurant was still open, a cinema, the House of Schiaparelli. Life went on. If only one could ignore the cats that roamed the streets, left behind when their owners fled the city, the covered street lights, the windows obscured by blackout curtains, all of which told a different story to the romance of summer in Paris.

'I saw you talking with Monsieur,' Estella said abruptly, once they'd crossed over Rue du Temple and were enveloped in the familiar scent of decay and leather that was the Marais.

'He is coming with me tonight, as usual,' Estella's mother said.

'To the Gare du Nord?' Estella persisted, unable to shake the feeling that, lately, on the nights her mother had been out, it was to do more than serve soup to refugees.

'*Oui.*' Estella's mother squeezed her arm. 'I will start at the Gare du Nord.'

'And then?'

'I will be careful.'

Which confirmed all of Estella's suspicious. 'I'll come with you.'

'No. It's better if you enjoy whatever time there is left.'

And Estella suddenly understood that all the talk about France standing strong was a fervent wish, not false belief, a wish her mother held for her daughter's sake. And, not for the first time in her life, Estella felt an overwhelming gratitude to her mother, who'd raised Estella by herself, who'd made sure she went to school, who'd worked hard to feed and clothe and shelter her, who never complained, who had such a small life, confined to the atelier and to her daughter.

'I love you, Maman,' she whispered, kissing her mother's cheek.

'That's the only thing that matters,' her mother said, giving a rare and beautiful smile, altering the contours of her face so that she looked more her age, which was only thirty-seven – not old at all. Estella wanted to stitch that moment into the night, thread it so tightly against the sky that it could never be unpicked.

Instead she watched her mother walk up Rue du Temple towards the Gare du Nord. Then Estella continued on to the Passage Saint-Paul, a tiny, dirty alleyway which led to a hidden entrance to the beautiful Église Saint-Paul-Saint-Louis, and on which their apartment was also located. As she pushed open the front door of the building, the concierge, Monsieur Montpelier, an old drunk of a man, grunted and thrust a note at her.

She read it and swore under her breath. It was the last thing she wanted to do tonight.

'*Putain*,' the concierge hissed at her choice of words.

Estella ignored him. She'd scald his eyeballs later when she left in her gold dress but, right now, she had work to do. She hurried up six flights of winding stairs to the apartment and, even though it was June, put on a long cloak. Then she walked back the way she'd come until she reached the buying offices of one of the American department stores off the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré.

Madame Flynn, who must have been one of the only Americans left in Paris, was, as Estella knew she'd be, alone in her office. On the desk in front of her was a stack of boxes labelled Schiaparelli. 'Be as quick as you can,' Madame Flynn said, turning her back as if she didn't know what Estella was about to do when of course the opposite was true.

Estella removed the dresses from the boxes and hid them under her cloak. Without a word to Madame Flynn, she hurried back down the stairs, along the street and up another set of stairs to the copy house where Estella moonlighted when the fashion shows were on. During the shows, sketchers like her could capture, on a good day, fifteen copies of haute couture dresses which she then sold to the copy house or American department store buyers.

The market in Paris and America for copies of Chanel, Vionnet, Lanvin, Callot Soeurs, Mainbocher – all the couturiers – was insatiable. Estella had always known she could earn more money working at the copy house. But she also knew that if she spent every day copying – stealing really – other people's designs then she'd never have the heart to create her own. So she only worked as a sketcher during the shows, pencil flying discreetly over the paper so that the *vendeuse* wouldn't notice she was doing more than mark the number of the dress that had caught her attention, scrutinising the models wafting elegantly through the *salle*, capturing details: the number of pleats in a skirt, the width of a lapel, the size of a button – praying for the model to be a slow walker so that Estella didn't end up with unfinished sketches that she'd never be able to sell.

The Chanel show was always Estella's favourite. There, it was a true challenge to capture fifteen sketches. Although the lines were simpler, the elegance was so manifest that she had to work harder than ever to catch it; it was more than just fabric and buttons and zippers. Each dress had a soul. And, at Chanel, everything was quiet and serene. She lacked the cover of the circus atmosphere that prevailed at a house like Patou, beneath which

one could easily hide their dirty work. No, at Chanel, the *vendeuse* had sharper eyes than a sniper. Each guest received a slip of paper to make notes on rather than a large programme perfect for hiding sketches and Estella had to draw while appearing not to move her pencil at all.

She'd always convinced herself it was a game and now that the American buyers weren't coming over to see the shows because of the war, her income from the last season had been much smaller so she'd told herself she had to take the opportunities when they were offered. Then she could pay off a little more of the debt that she and her mother owed Monsieur Aumont for the English lessons her mother had insisted Estella take every day after school since she was six. Lessons which her mother hadn't been able to afford and for which the Monsieur had lent them the money – French women were not allowed to have their own bank accounts, and therefore couldn't borrow money from a bank. They couldn't vote either; they were an underclass, meant to sit unobtrusively at home and bake and breed.

Thus the war had come as a terrible shock for some, unused to doing anything besides dress as well as they could afford. Luckily, Jeanne Bisette, through necessity, had brought Estella up to be more resourceful than most. Which meant Estella knew that, while Monsieur Aumont would write off the debt in an instant, it was a matter of immense pride for Estella's mother that they paid off every last cent. It would be impossible to do so without Estella's extra income.

It was the English lessons that had allowed Estella to do so well as a sketcher; none of the American buyers spoke French so they all preferred to deal with her. If she didn't respond to Madame Flynn's summonses, the debt would trouble her mother, a debt Estella had only added to during the year she'd spent at The Paris School, the French campus on the Place des Vosges of the New York School of Fine and Applied Art. There, until war had shut it down, Estella had formed a dream of one day seeing her own name

on a fashion atelier, of having customers wear dresses designed by her rather than stolen by her. But it was at moments like this, with six Schiaparelli dresses stuffed beneath her cloak, that she knew it would never happen, that an American buyer like Madame Flynn taking a commission from a copy house to lend them a selection of dresses to duplicate was in poor taste and a designer like Elsa Schiaparelli would stitch Estella's eyelids shut if she knew.

Estella vowed this would be the last time.

But, right now, Madame Chaput was waiting for Estella to begin. The fitters took the dresses Estella produced from beneath her cloak and made patterns while Estella sketched and Madame Chaput noted what kind of buttons she would need and stole snippets of fabric from the seams where nobody would notice. Then Madame gave Estella the money for a taxi and Estella returned the dresses to Madame Flynn along with the commission Madame Chaput paid for having been given access to the dresses to copy. Estella knew the dresses would be on a boat to New York tomorrow – if boats were still sailing given the turmoil of the last few days – and that Madame Chaput would have models made up within two days, ready to sell to her line of loyal Parisians who wanted all of the haute but none of the cost of couture in their wardrobe.

Then Estella walked back to the Marais again, knowing she'd have to be quick if she was to sew her gold dress into being and still make it to the jazz club before midnight. Back at the apartment building, she filled a bucket with water from the tap in the courtyard. Under the gleaming eye of the concierge, who loathed Estella and her mother for their refusal to make obeisance to him and buy him port at Christmas, and who enjoyed watching the deprivation of those who lived in one of the many Parisian apartment buildings without running water, she hauled the bucket up to the top floor – the cheapest floor. She put some water into a kettle, set it on the stove and made a cup of coffee. Then she sat down at her sewing machine, took out her scissors and cut the

fabric to the sketch she'd drawn at the atelier, wishing she had the luxury of a cutter who'd make the line of the dress as perfect as she wished it to be, knowing she'd never be a Vionnet who worked from scissors rather than sketches.

It took her an hour and a half but, when it was done she grinned; it looked exactly as she'd intended. She slipped the dress on and frowned at her scuffed shoes, but her skills didn't stretch to cobbling and she hadn't the money to buy a new pair of pumps. She threw on her cloak in case the evening grew cold later, eschewed the gas mask she was supposed to carry but made the one concession her mother asked of her – to carry a white handkerchief so that she could perhaps be seen by cars in the blacked-out city.

Once in Montmartre, she bypassed Bricktop's – she couldn't afford that – and entered a club that was decidedly less elegant but definitely more fun, where the Montmartre patois syncopated between saxophone riffs and where one man, a munitions worker no doubt, tried to squeeze past her a little too tightly. She fought him off with a hard stare and a few well-chosen words and slipped into a seat at a table beside Renée, one of Monsieur Aumont's daughters.

'*Bonsoir*,' Renée said, kissing her cheeks. 'Do you have any Gauloises left?'

Estella produced her last two and they both lit up.

'*What* are you wearing?' Renée asked with a bemused laugh.

'I made it.'

'I guessed as much. It's not something you'd find on the racks at BHV.'

'Exactly.'

'Isn't it a touch . . . outlandish?'

Estella shook her head. Renée was wearing one of the Heidi-style dresses that had been hanging forlornly on the racks at Au Printemps as if they'd forgotten the way back to the mountains and she looked like every other woman in the club: demure, watered down, like the wine they were drinking.

‘Why would we expect anything less from Estella?’ Another voice, one with a smile inside it, carried over to their table. Huette, Renée’s sister, leaned down to kiss Estella’s cheeks. ‘You look *magnifique*,’ Huette said.

‘Dance with me.’ A man rudely interrupted them. He smelled like the Pigalle at midnight – liquored, fragranced with perfume from the necks of the dozen other girls he’d already taken a turn with on the dance floor. A man revelling in the advantage of his scarceness, who would have, with his lack of manners, no chance at all were most men not away fighting.

‘No thank you,’ Estella said.

‘I will,’ Renée said.

‘I wanted her.’ The man pointed at Estella.

‘But none of us want you,’ she said.

‘I do,’ Renée said, almost desperately, and Estella knew it was a sign of the times; a girl could spend all night without a dance partner and here was one before them, albeit coarse, but what did that matter?

‘Don’t,’ Huette said to Renée.

As Estella watched Huette put a hand on her sister’s arm, a spontaneous act – one that told of how much she loved Renée no matter how irritating she could be – Estella felt a stab of yearning. It was followed immediately by an awareness of how silly she was; wishing for something she’d never have. She should be grateful that she even had a mother, rather than selfishly covet someone’s sister.

The man pulled Renée to her feet, leading her to the dance floor, making sure to hold her as close as he could and Estella turned away, revolted, when she saw him press his crotch into Renée.

‘Come and sing. We’ll change the tempo to something fast so she can get away from him,’ Estella said.

Huette followed her over to the four old-timers who comprised the band, with whom Estella and Huette had spent many evenings playing piano and singing, putting their school music lessons to work. Estella’s mother had learned to sing at a convent school she’d

attended when she was younger and she'd always sung at home, adorning their apartment with music rather than useless gewgaws, and she'd passed on her love of song to Estella from a very early age. But while her mother's preference was for operatic hymns, Estella's was for deep and throaty jazz.

The musicians didn't miss a beat as they kissed Estella's cheeks and Luc, the pianist, complimented her dress in a patois so thick and dirty no ordinary Frenchwoman could have understood it. He finished the song then stood up to get a drink at the bar. Estella sat down at the piano and Huette joined Philippe at the microphone. Estella picked out the notes to '*J'ai Deux Amours*' and the crowd applauded appreciatively. As Estella played, she hoped everyone in the room had a love strong enough for Paris that it would save the city from whatever might soon befall it as the Germans drew ever closer. But Huette's voice wasn't high enough for the song so she bumped Estella off the piano and made Estella sing it, which she did.

Every patron in the club joined her for the final chorus letting Estella believe, for just a few seconds, that everything would be fine: that Paris was too grand, too legendary, too brilliant to ever be troubled by a short and grotesque man like Adolf Hitler.

She stayed at the club for only a short time after that, laughing with Philippe and Huette and Luc until she became aware that they hadn't managed to save Renée, that she was leaving with the brute of a man who'd asked her to dance and Estella suddenly felt tired, far older than twenty-two, and more melancholy than ever.

'Time for me to go,' Estella said, rising and kissing everyone twice on the cheeks.

Once out in the Paris night, she didn't walk straight back to the apartment. She wound her way through the dirt and dilapidation of the Marais, a dereliction all the more obvious at each of the *hôtels particulier*, once grand homes of the nobles that, no matter what had been done to them – their transformation into jam factories and the desecration of their once grand courtyards beneath piles of cart

wheels, pallets and lean-tos – still held their heads high. As Estella brushed her hand over the stone walls, the same way she'd caressed the roll of gold silk in the atelier, she wondered if the elegance imprinted in those walls – the same as the way a couture dress never lost the line that set it apart from pret-a-porter – would withstand Stuka bombings and an army of men in cold grey uniforms.

The Carreau du Temple was quiet as she passed, the fabric and second-hand clothes sellers all abed, ready to be up at dawn selling the discarded garments they'd found in the rubbish bins of those who lived over by the Champs Élysées. Indeed the whole area was quiet, Estella often the only one on the street as she strolled through her city, taking in things she'd grown used to but which were too beautiful to take for granted now that they might be lost: the fading brilliance of the red, gold and blue painting over the *porte de l'hôtel de Clisson*, the building's curved medieval turrets framing the gateway like a pair of plump sentries; the symmetrical pavilions and grand arched passage of the Carnavalet.

Without meaning to, she found herself outside a house on the Rue de Sévigné, an abandoned *hôtel particulier* that her mother had often taken her to when she was younger, where Estella had played among the disused rooms, a place that Estella suspected was the location of her mother's meetings with Monsieur Aumont. But with the blackout curtains in place, the streets glazed a preternatural blue by the covered street lights, it was impossible to see if anyone was inside. Not French Baroque like its neighbours, and eschewing symmetry and form, the house lurked in true Gothic style, the hunchback of the street. Its coroneted turrets should have put her in mind of fairytale palaces but instead they made her think of women held prisoner at the top of the tower, all escape routes cut off.

Impulse made her push open the wooden door that led into the courtyard, the statuary of the Four Seasons gazing imperiously down on her from the walls of the house, including a headless Summer bereft of his power. The gravel paths had not been swept

and raked for many years but still formed a star shape, each spoke divided by hedges that had long since outgrown formality and now shot and twisted where they wished. Mint, probably once confined to a herb garden, waved its stems wildly, perfuming the air with the hot scent of danger. And then she heard it. The scrape of a foot over stone. Fear ran its teeth along her back like a zipper.

She turned. There, collapsed on a rickety bench, was Monsieur Aumont. The smell of blood and panic rose off his clothes and his skin.

'Mon Dieu!' she gasped.

He lifted his head and Estella saw a dark stain on the front of his shirt. 'Take these,' he whispered, passing Estella a small bundle, 'to the Théâtre du Palais-Royal. Please. For Paris. Find *l'engoulevent* – the nightjar. You can trust him.'

'Where is Maman?' Estella demanded.

'At home. Safe. Go!'

He slumped over again and Estella moved in closer to see how she could help him. She was able to lean him back against the bench, to see his pleading eyes. 'Go,' he repeated roughly. 'For Paris.'

Whatever she held meant nothing but danger. Yet it was important enough for him to have been injured seriously and also precarious enough for him to have added that one word, *safe* when she'd asked about her mother. Had it only been an hour ago that Estella had been singing of her love for Paris? And now she was being asked to do something for her city.

Monsieur Aumont closed his eyes. Estella unrolled the bundle. Maps of a building drawn on silk. She could slide them into the pockets she'd sewn discreetly into the lining of her cape, pockets perfect for moving copied dresses around the city. But she was so conspicuous: a cape of blue-black velvet trimmed with silver beads over a shining gold dress.

'Go!' Monsieur Aumont whispered for a third time, through gritted teeth.

Estella nodded at last. Because now she felt the absolute truth of the words she'd sung at the club: her city was being violated and, perhaps, if she did as Monsieur Aumont was begging her to, she could prevent one more trespass on Paris's honour.